South Haven Tribune

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September 7, 2025

LMC president announces retirement

Kubatzke to vacate post in 2026, college kicks off search

By LOUISE WREGE
For the Tribune

SOUTH HAVEN — Lake Michigan College President Trevor Kubatzke may be retiring, but he'll still be around the campus for a while.

Kubatzke announced his resignation this past week and marked his last day for Dec. 31, 2026, in an effort to allow the college's board of trustees time to find his successor.

"After much reflection and

KUBATZKE

with a profound sense of gratitude, I am writing to formally announce my retirement as president of Lake Michigan College," Kubatzke stated in a letter to the board Tuesday. "This decision does not come lightly, as my time here has been among the most meaningful and rewarding chapters of my professional and personal life."

Since Kubatzke started leading the college in April of 2017, the institution has gone through a period of significant growth and transformation.

"The most meaningful moments for me have never been about statistics or milestones," Kubatzke said in a news release. "They have been found in the laughter echoing through the halls during Welcome Week, the determination in the eyes of a returning adult learner, the heartfelt conversations with faculty about teaching and learning, and the triumphs of students walking across the stage at commencement."

Under his tenure, the college has expanded its dual enrollment programs with local high schools, developed apprenticeships with area employers and enhanced collaborations with four-year institutions.

Kubatzke also helped modernize the Benton Harbor and South Haven campuses for students to be more successful by implementing new academic pathways and expanding support services. Kubatzke said he plans to continue supporting LMC in various capacities after his retirement.

"While I look forward to retirement and the new adventures that await, I will never be far from the mission that has defined my career," Kubatzke said in the release. "I remain committed to community college education and will continue to support and champion this great

See **KUBATZKE**, page A2

Louise Wrege / HP file photo

Berrien RESA Superintendent Eric Hoppstock, right, speaks about the Berrien Talent Collaborative while Lake Michigan College President Trevor Kubatzke looks on during a 2024 news conference.

The great outdoors

SH City Council holds meeting outside, introduces fire code

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council embraced the recent nice weather by holding their regular meeting at Elkenburg Park.

Residents were invited to enjoy free hot dogs, chips, cupcakes and water before the meeting began.

City Manager Kate Hosier said they try to host one of the meetings at the park every two years, but it can be difficult due to how uncooperative the weather can be. Tuesday's meeting was held a day later than normal due to the Labor Day holiday.

During the meeting, the 2021 edition of the International Fire Code ordinance was introduced, and a public hearing was set for Sept. 15.

"This is to assist with the adopted 2021 building codes that we adopted by ordinance," Hosier said.

The city previously adopted the 2015 edition of the fire code. However, the 2021 edition aligns with the 2021 Michigan Building Code that the state recently adopted.

Hosier said the updated fire codes have already been adopted by three other townships in the area, including Casco, Geneva and South Haven townships.

Photos by Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Human Resources Director Kim Wise helps hand out hot dogs Tuesday at Elkenburg Park in South Haven, prior to a city council meeting that was held outdoors.

The South Haven City Council holds its regular meeting at Elkenburg Park on Tuesday, where staff handed out free food to residents in attendance.

A life saved

South Haven police officer Cooper Carns was presented with a Lifesaving Award for his quick action during an incident where a driver was found unconscious in their car on July 31 at the Village Market Express in South Haven.

"He quickly assessed the driver and determined he did not have a pulse," Interim Police Chief Adam DeBoer said. "He and a bystander were able to get the male out of the truck and laid him on the ground. Immediately, Officer Carns began performing CPR on the male victim."

South Haven City Council and staff hand out hot dogs, chips, cupcakes and water on Tuesday to area residents before the city council's meeting, which was held at Elkenburg Park.

South Haven residents gather at Elkenburg Park on Tuesday to enjoy free food and drinks before the regular city council meeting.

DeBoer said Carns continued CPR until South Haven Area Emergency Services arrived and were able to regain the driver's heartbeat.

City council approved the special event Tractor Cruize Parade to take place from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday, which runs from the Michigan Flywheelers Museum to South Beach.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

Timeline extended on South Haven housing projects

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council received an update on the current housing projects, which included the Overton and Trailside developments.

City Manager Kate Hosier said the housing initiative report was done by Assistant City Manager Michael Landis who was out of state at the time of Tuesday's meeting.

"We have put together a number of updates on our housing initiatives – as council knows, housing is one of our priorities," Hosier said.

The Trailside project continues to make progress with 10 permitted units currently under construction along Elkenburg Street.

According to the report, four more units are in the process of being permitted to be constructed on Indiana Avenue.

Once completed, the project will have 24 units built.

"The Trailside development is ongoing and they've got a number of houses that have been started," Hosier said. "They have a number of houses to continue and have a second phase that has yet to go to the planning commission."

The Overton project that is being overseen by Dwelling Place of Grand Rapids is preparing an application to the Michigan State Housing Development Authority for April 2026.

Hosier said environmental tests are planned to have an updated assessment of the site. The tests are to provide Dwelling Place with clarity on what is needed to have a safe housing development.

Dwelling Place is planning a series of public engagement sessions for October and November to give residents and stakeholders the opportunity to learn more about the project and ask questions.

The Brownfield Redevelopment Authority is working to assess which properties can be used for possible housing developments. Grants and tax increment financing is also being researched to help pay for housing possible housing projects, Hosier said.

City council has extended the timeline for the Hales project so the developers can secure incentive packages from state agencies in order to begin development.

South Haven Township also has housing projects in progress, including senior housing being done by Samaritas, a 100-unit development along County Road 288 and plans for 45 homes to be constructed along 73 ½ Street.

"They (the township) have at least two MSHDA projects, one has been approved, one is in the process of going through their planning commission and then they have a number of market-rate housing developments that have been approved," Hosier said.

Other initiatives include the city applying for a homeowner rehabilitation grant to help people make critical home repairs and discussions with Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity for housing options.

Council Member Joe Reeser said he's frustrated there is not just one person in charge of handling all the moving parts and putting together one cohesive plan for affordable housing.

"I just think we need someone in the city or people to put all of this together," Reeser said.

Hosier said there are a lot of moving parts with each project and some of them can't be done by just one person.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "Altered Consumerism" exhibition from Aug. 8 through Sept. 20.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Photos provided / Tom Renner

LEFT: Rylan Jenks leads the way for Quin Hayes during the season opener for the South Haven varsity football team against Dowagiac High School on Aug. 28. **RIGHT:** South Haven Ram defenders swarm a Dowagiac ball carrier during the season opener on aug. 28.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays starting Sept. 2.

South Haven Farm Market: Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. through October at Huron Street Pavilion.

Daydreamer Domes: Local community pool day every Tuesday at 11 a.m.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lake Arvesta: Summer at the pasture concert every Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: New Exhibit – "The Adventures of Liberty Hyde Bailey – Chicago: 1872." Available during museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

September

4-7 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Antique Engine and Tractor Show. Gates open at 8 a.m. Admission is $10 per person. Children 12 years old and under are free with paid admission.

7 – First Congregational UCC – Summer Concert Series presents Lexi Adams at 3 p.m.

8 – South Haven Garden Club: Tomato tasting at First Congregational Church

8 – Golf: SAC Lakeshore Jam, girls varsity at 4 p.m. at Hawkshead.

8 – Paw Paw Community Chorus: Christman Concert practice begins at 7 p.m. at First Presbyterian Church in Paw Paw.

8 – Stellar Steppers: Sunrise to Sunset Walk along the Kal-Haven Trail.

9 – Swimming: Girls varsity against Harper Creek High School at 6 p.m.

9 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Strummers ukulele event for all ages from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

9 – Rotary Club: Pam Ford from Bronson Healthy Kids will present.

10 – South Haven Memorial Library: Author event from 6 to 7 p.m. with Susan Ryan to promote her new medical memoir: "Brainstorm: Navigating Life with Chronic Migraine."

10 – Cross Country: Conference Jamboree, boys and girls varsity against Saugatuck High School at 5 p.m. at Warner Camp.

10 – Football: Middle school boys against Coloma High School at 5 p.m.

11 – South Haven Area Young Professionals: Monthly networking event from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at New Park Gastropub.

11 – Football: Boys junior varsity against Coloma High School at 6 p.m.

11 – South Haven Speaker Series: The impact of immigration law on families presented by Prof. David Thronson.

12-13 – South Haven Jazz Festival: From 5 to 8 p.m. at Dyckman Park and the Huron Street Pavilion. Featuring Jim Cooper Quartet, Edye Evans Hyde and The Terry Lower Trio and the Lake Effect Jazz Big Band and Tim Coffman.

13 – Lakeshore Harvest Ride.

13 – South Haven Theatre Series: "Mike Royko: The Toughest Man in Chicago" at 7:30 p.m. at Listiak Auditorium. Tickets cost $15.

15 – Soccer: Middle school boys against Coloma High School at North Shore Elementary School.

15 – Soccer: Boys varsity against Coloma High School at 6 p.m.

16 – Listening Session: Economic development strategic plan revision listening session from 5 to 7 p.m. at City Hall. Facilitated by Economic Development Consultant Jim Hettinger. All are welcome.

16 – Swimming: Girls varsity against Allegan Public Schools at 6 p.m.

16 – Rotary Club: Evening meeting at the American Legion beginning at 5:30 p.m. Jordan Alsup from Beachwalk Properties will present.

17 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

17 – Volleyball: Girls middle school against Black River Public School.

17 – Football: Boys middle school against Allegan Public Schools at 5 p.m.

18 – After Business Ours: Networking event hosted by South Haven Banking Center. For South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce members only. From 5 to 7 p.m. RSVP required.

18 – Tennis: Boys varsity against Hackett Catholic Prep at 4:30 p.m.

19 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play Fridays for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

19 – Football: Boys varsity against Constantine High School at 7 p.m.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: STEM Saturdays from 11 a.m. to noon.

23 – Tennis: Boys varsity against Buchanan High School at 4:30 p.m.

23 – Rotary Club: Club assembly.

24 – Soccer: Boys middle school against Fennville High School at North Shore Elementary School.

24 – Volleyball: Girls middle school against Watervliet High School.

24 – Soccer: Boys junior varsity against Fennville High School at 5 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

24 – Soccer: Boys varsity against Fennville High School at 6:30 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

24 – Historical Association of South Haven: "Genealogy for Beginners" presentation by Katherine Wilson from 7 to 8 p.m.

KUBATZKE

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institution in any way I can."

A presidential search

The board of trustees has retained the Pauly Group of Chicago to assist in the presidential search process.

According to the release, the Pauly Group is recognized as one of the leading academic search consulting firms in the nation, specializing exclusively in senior administrative searches for community and technical colleges.

The board will hold an open forum next week to allow residents to share their perspective on the qualities and priorities needed in the next LMC president. The forum will be led by Angela Provart, president of the Pauly Group, and take place from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Sept. 11 at the Benton Harbor Campus, Todd Center, Room 1413.

"We are committed to conducting a thorough and inclusive search process to find the next leader who will continue building upon Lake Michigan College's strong foundation," LMC Board Chair Joan Smith said in the release. "Dr. Kubatzke's early announcement demonstrates his continued commitment to the institution and provides us with the time needed to identify the best candidate to lead LMC into the future."

Kubatzke effectively replaced Jennifer Spielvogel, who was fired in May of 2016 after three months amid charges of unauthorized spending and unprofessional behavior. She sued LMC in federal court, with both sides settling in January of 2018 for $145,000. While the board of trustees looked for a new leader in 2016, former LMC President Bob Harrison returned temporarily to his old job.

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege

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- **Blessings in a Backpack South Haven is a chapter of a national 501c3 corporation headquartered in Louisville, KY.**
- **South Haven Chapter was established in 2012.**
- **Program is an "opt-in" service for families.**
- **Served 27% of SHPS elementary school students in '24-'25 year.**
- **Five community organizations volunteer to pack the food bags each week.**
- **Weekly food costs are currently $4.00+ per student = $125 per year.**
- **Rotary Club of South Haven began to coordinate the program in 2023.**
- **Totally funded by your donations; entirely managed by volunteers.**

Help us feed our children in need. Donate to either:

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PO Box 507
South Haven, MI 49090

or to:

Blessings in a Backpack South Haven, MI Fund #1123
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Louisville, KY 40295

Together, we can ensure every child has the support they need to succeed.

SH jazz festival returns for eighth year

By TRIBUNE STAFF

Photo provided

The South Haven Jazz Festival features a variety of performances that can be enjoyed by people of all ages.

SOUTH HAVEN — The annual South Haven Jazz Festival returns for its eighth year on Sept. 12 and 13.

According to a news release, the festival performances will take place at Dyckman Park and the Huron Street Pavilion.

"We're excited to welcome everyone back for the 2025 festival," South Haven Jazz Festival Chairperson Larry Brown said in the release. "This year's event will be a full two-day celebration of creativity and live music and we can't wait to share it with the South Haven community."

The full schedule of performances includes music from Tim Coffman with the LEJ Big Band, Edye Evans Hyde with the Terry Lower Trio, the Jim Cooper Quartet, Lake Effect Jazz Big Band, Shout Section Big Band, DB Horns and the Lana Hoffman Jazz Quartet.

"Visit South Haven is proud to support and sponsor this incredible community event," Executive Director of Visit South Haven Jen Sistrunk said in the release. "We're excited to enjoy another great festival with both locals and visitors alike."

Both stages are part of downtown South Haven's social district, allowing event attendees to purchase a social district cup from participating businesses and bring them to the festival.

Event organizers recommend attendees bring lawn chairs to easily move between the stages.

Admission to the festival is free and all ages are welcome to attend.

For more details on the South Haven Jazz Festival, go to southhavenjazz festival.com.

Information about accommodations and other area events can be found at southhaven.org.

SH seeks grant for housing rehabilitation

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven recently announced plans to submit a grant request for housing rehabilitation.

According to a news release, the request will be sent to the Michigan State Housing Development Authority for Community Development Block Grant dollars.

If awarded, eligible residents will be able to seek funding for critical housing rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation work may include:

■ Exterior repairs and improvements (e.g., siding, roofing, windows, doors, weatherproofing).

■ Interior work focusing on safety, accessibility, and code compliance.

■ Energy efficiency upgrades such as insulation, HVAC, water heater replacement, energy-efficient appliances, exterior security lighting and electrical system improvements.

■ Accessibility modifications including ramps, zero-step entries, handrails, and ADA compliant kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms.

A public hearing on the city's application will be held at 7 p.m. on Sept. 15 during the regularly scheduled city council meeting.

Public comment regarding the application may be made during that time.

Comments can also be made in writing to Assistant City Manager Michael Landis at mlandis@southhavenmi.gov.

The deadline for the application is on Sept. 17.

The full application is available for review on the city's website.

Huron Street reconstruction project underway

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven recently announced that work is underway for street reconstruction on Huron street.

According to a news release, work is expected to last 11 weeks and be completed by Nov. 15, unless unexpected delays occur.

Construction will take place on Huron Street from Kalamazoo Street to Broadway Street.

The city's contractor, Northern Construction Services is overseeing the project.

Reconstruction work includes asphalt, storm sewer, sidewalk, curb and gutter, ADA improvements, electrical improvements and traffic calming measures at the School Street and Huron Street intersection.

The street will be closed to thru traffic during this duration. The intersections will be open during the entire project.

Access to local residences and businesses will be maintained at all times.

"We appreciate your patience and understanding of any inconvenience during this project," the release stated.

This work is partially funded by a grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation Small Urban Fund program.

There will be weekly tailgate meetings on Friday mornings at 9 a.m. at the Huron Street Pavilion. The first meeting was held on Sept. 5.

All are invited to hear the update, ask questions or give comments.

For any questions or concerns, contact Mike Dopp at 269-637-0770, mdopp@southhavenmi.gov or Jarret Geering at 269-419-2475, Jarret.Geering@ohm advisors.com.

Maritime lecture to share lake sturgeon restoration journey

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Michigan Maritime Museum is hosting a lecture presented by leading Fisheries Biologist Corey Jerome from the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians Natural Resources Department.

According to a news release, the lecture is entitled "Manistee River Lake Sturgeon: 20 Years of Restoration" and will take place at 6:30 p.m. on Sept. 17.

This lecture explores the 20-year journey to restore lake sturgeon to the Big Manistee River, an effort that intertwines traditional Anishinaabek cultural values with modern biological science.

"The Big Manistee River watershed may once have held one of the largest nmé (sturgeon) populations in the Lake Michigan Basin," Little River Band of Ottawa Indians stated in the release, "From time immemorial, the Anishinaabek reverenced the nmé and looked forward annually to the rite of spring when the Anishinaabek would reunite on the banks of the Big Manistee River for the nmé runs."

Once a thriving and sacred presence in the watershed, nmé now return in greatly diminished numbers, symbolic of a deeper cultural and ecological loss.

"Today, the nmé come back to the river not as a healthy component of either the river or Tribal culture. The nmé come back now embattled – only a few who can be called survivors," Little River Band of Ottawa Indians stated in the release. "These reduced runs of nmé are cause for great disease among the Anishinaabek, yet these issues comprise much more than a single species of fish – they necessarily involve the breadth and scope of Anishinaabek culture, the cultures of all the People of the Great Lakes, the integrity of the Big Manistee watershed and the health of all species that live therein."

The lecture will present an overview of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians' Big Manistee River Nmé Restoration efforts.

The plan incorporates both cultural and biological criteria for establishing goals for restoration of the Big Manistee River nmé population.

A cultural context task group, composed of Tribal members and Tribal government staff, addressed the cultural context. Tribal biologists developed the biological criteria to be consistent and ultimately driven by the cultural context.

Attendees will gain insight into the Nmé Stewardship Plan that highlights:

■ Streamside stocking successes and challenges.

■ Juvenile and adult nmé recruitment.

■ Spawning population assessments.

■ The deep cultural ties between the Anishinaabek people and the nmé.

Jerome has been at the forefront of lake sturgeon restoration and rehabilitation in the Big Manistee River and the broader 1836 ceded territory for the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians since 2012.

"First introduced to the restoration efforts as a summer technician in 2007 while earning a bachelor's degree in Fisheries Management from Lake Superior State University, his commitment to the cause has grown into a leadership role shaping the future of nmé rehabilitation," the release stated.

This program is part of the museum's year-long series, "Whispers Across the Water," which honors the diverse voices that have shaped the Great Lakes maritime history and heritage.

"Through a compelling lineup of programs and events, the series brings to light the rich and often underrepresented stories of Indigenous peoples, African Americans, women and other minority communities whose contributions have left a lasting impact on the region," the release stated.

Photo provided

Fisheries Biologist Corey Jerome explores the 20-year journey to restore lake sturgeon to the Big Manistee River in a special lecture on Sept. 17 at the Michigan Maritime Museum.

The series runs monthly through November.

"This lecture series is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Nielsen-Wells Grant Fund and Mike and Susan Smith," the release stated.

Tickets are free for museum members and $10 for non-members. Doors open at 6 p.m.

For more information about the Museum's events, go to www.michiganmaritimemuseum.org/events/.

Firefighters auctioning off former fire truck

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Area Emergency Services is in the process of auctioning a 1998 Spencer Manufacturing Pumper/Tanker fire truck.

According to a news release, the online auction is open to the public now and ends Tuesday.

"This truck is perfect for a construction business, landscaping company, or volunteer fire department," the release stated.

All of the proceeds from this auction will go to SHAES and can be used to buy new water hoses, another vehicle, helmets and other essentials the fire district needs.

The truck is fully operational, runs and pumps great and is ready to go to work immediately.

The fire truck has 30,000 miles on it and features an 8.3L Cummins engine, Allison MD-3066T automatic transmission, Hale 1,250 GPM pump, 1,800-gallon poly water tank and the chassis is FL-80 Freightliner, single axle, 204-inch wheelbase, driver/passenger/rear dumps.

Founded in 2006, Municibid serves more than 7,000 governments and schools across the country to auction off fire trucks, buses, ambulances, heavy machinery, agricultural equipment and other surplus goods to the public.

Michigan residents are able to bid in the government auction online at municibid.com.

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‘Rake a Difference’ in need of volunteers

United Way of SWMI brings back event for Nov. 13

By TRIBUNE STAFF

Photo provided / United Way of Southwest Michigan

United Way of Southwest Michigan's Rake a Difference volunteers pack leaf bags during last year's event. The 2025 event will take place Nov. 13.

United Way of Southwest Michigan is looking for volunteers for its 15th annual Rake a Difference event on Nov. 13.

According to a news release from United Way of Southwest Michigan, volunteers who sign up will assist local seniors with leaf raking and gutter cleaning, which keeps neighborhoods clean and fosters connections throughout Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

“Rake a Difference is simply a big success because the teams of volunteers throughout each community make it happen,” Debbie Ramirez, director of impact and volunteer engagement at UWSM, said in the release. “It amazes me each year how teams find a way to make this a fun team-building event while also helping community members.”

Volunteer sign-ups are open now through Oct. 17 at RakeADifference.com, while all materials – gloves, leaf bags, rakes – will be provided.

Senior citizens in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties can sign up to receive assistance by calling 269-932-3554 during business hours. According to the release, anyone interested should call before Sept. 30 to avoid being waitlisted.

More than 1,200 people stepped up to volunteer last year, impacting over 350 seniors. Ramirez said Cass and Van Buren counties especially need volunteers.

“Since we opened the phones on Tuesday morning, it's become clear to me the need for volunteers to help these seniors is growing,” she said in the release. “Our goal here is to serve everyone, including our waitlist. I know Southwest Michigan will come through.”

Supporters of the event include AEP Foundation, Gast Manufacturing, French Paper Co., Midwest Energy & Communications, Invenergy, Whirlpool Corp., Michigan Works, Silver Beach Pizza, BluCat Consulting, Comcast NBC Universal, Hungerford CPAs, Niles Precision Co. and Vail Rubber Works.

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CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN
PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS

On Monday, September 22, 2025, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the request(s) below. The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 PM at City Hall, 539 Phoenix St, South Haven, concerning the following:

1. 554 Williams Street – Nonuse/Dimensional Variances

Cynthia Compton, on behalf of Overlook 554 LLC, has applied for nonuse/dimensional variances seeking relief from Zoning Ordinance Section 703 regarding front yard setback and building height requirements to build a three-unit residential condominium building, from Section 2111 to permit an accessory structure in a front yard, and Section 2112 to permit a swimming pool in a front yard. The applicant is also seeking a 12-month extension of the variances granted on May 29, 2024. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-776 001-45.

Supporting documentation is available for review at the Building Services office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090. Written comments may be submitted in lieu of or in addition to a personal appearance. Written comments must be received no later than 12 p.m. (noon) on Monday, September 22, 2025. Written comments should be addressed to the ZBA and must be submitted to the Zoning Administrator at kdissette@southhavenmi.gov or via postal mail addressed to the ZBA and sent to 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.

Individuals requesting reasonable accommodation for impairments or disabilities should contact the City Clerk no later than five days prior to the public hearing in person at City Hall, at 269-637-0750, or at mkiker@southhavenmi.gov.

Kelly Getman-Dissette, Zoning Administrator
(269)637-0760 kdissette@southhavenmi.gov

Classifieds Make A Cash Connection!

Michigan State Police address opioid crisis

By TRIBUNE STAFF

PAW PAW — In recognition of International Overdose Awareness Day and National Recovery Month in September, the Michigan State Police Paw Paw Post are distributing Naloxone to residents.

According to a new release, residents can go to 43255 60th Ave., Paw Paw, MI during business hours to get Naloxone.

"Law enforcement can't address this alone, so we're distributing Naloxone, a life-saving nasal spray medication used to reverse opioid overdoses, with community support," Paw Paw Post commander 1st Lt. Scott Ernstes said in the release.

From January to June 2025, 11 deaths involving carfentanil were reported. None tested positive for carfentanil alone; 10 had cocaine and eight had fentanyl.

"Michigan Department of Health and Human Services warned residents about carfentanil, a potent fentanyl variant reemerging in the unregulated drug supply and contributing to overdose deaths," the release stated.

These deaths occurred in Ingham, Livingston, Eaton, Genesee, Oakland and Wayne counties.

"MDHSS and law enforcement officials in Southwest Michigan must remain vigilant and proactive due to its own ongoing opioid overdose issues," the release stated.

Residents can help by:

■ Carrying naloxone: It can save lives and requires no prescription.

■ Don't use alone: Using opioids with someone trained to respond reduces fatal overdose risk.

■ Seek help: Call the Michigan Opioid Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for confidential support and treatment referrals.

Additional Naloxone Distribution Locations:

■ Recovery Zone – 609 E Michigan Ave, Paw Paw, MI

■ Bronson Lakeview Outpatient Center – 451 Health Pkwy, Paw Paw, MI (indoor only)

■ Bronson Lakeview Family Care – 520 Railroad St, Bangor, MI

■ Bronson Lakeview Family Care – 319 W Delaware St, Decatur, MI

■ Bronson Lakeview Family Care Blue Star – 930 Blue Star Hwy, South Haven, MI

■ Van Buren CMH – 810 Hazen St, Paw Paw, MI

■ Noon or Night Recording Studio – 500 Austin St, Albion, MI

■ Recovery Services Unlimited – 2150 W Columbia Ave, Battle Creek, MI

■ Riverwood Center Benton Harbor – 1485 M-139, Benton Harbor, MI

■ Riverwood Center Niles – 24 N St Joseph Ave, Niles, MI

■ Alano Club – 933 S Burdick St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Bridgeway – 1606 S Burdick St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Comstock Library – 6130 King Hwy, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Cope Network – 3330 Miller Rd, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Family Health Center – 117 W Patterson St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ ISK Alcott & Portage – 2030 Portage Rd, Kalamazoo, MI

■ ISK Behavioral Health Urgent Care – 440 Kalamazoo Ave, Kalamazoo, MI

■ ISK Crosstown – 615 Crosstown Parkway, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Kalamazoo College – corner of Lovel and Campus Drive, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Ministry with Community – 500 N Edwards, Kalamazoo, MI

■ NACD – 612 N Park St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ EX-201 Front – 1020 S Westnedge, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Reach Sober Living – 2047 W Main St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Recovery Institute – 123 Westnedge Ave, Kalamazoo, MI (temporarily unavailable)

■ Urban Alliance – 1009 E Stockbridge Ave, Kalamazoo, MI

■ Washington Square Library – 1244 Portage St, Kalamazoo, MI

■ WMU Clinic – 1000 Oakland Drive, Kalamazoo, MI

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FOCUS

Photos by Eileen T. Meslar / Chicago Tribune / TNS

Sadie Rosen, center, and Tally Feingold pose with the portrait Jacob Ryan Reno drew of them in Logan Square Park on Aug. 10 in Chicago. Reno draws "terrible" portraits of people for $5.

Terrible Chicago artist draws *terrible* Chicago portraits

And finds a niche

By CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

Jacob Ryan Reno draws a portrait of sisters Amanda Sands, left, and Francesca Sands in Logan Square Park on Sunday, Aug. 10, 2025, in Chicago. Reno draws "terrible" portraits of people for $5.

Jacob Ryan Reno draws a portrait in Logan Square Park on Sunday, Aug. 10, 2025, in Chicago. Reno draws "terrible" portraits of people for $5.

Jacob Ryan Reno, long and boyish, wearing the kind of blue smock you imagine a painter would wear in a cartoon about a painter, is not good at his job. He draws and has become pretty popular in Chicago for those drawings. Yet … he's so bad at it. So bad he inspires a perverse confidence in that lack of talent, partly because he warns everyone with a sheepish smile that he's not very good. When I asked a woman in Logan Square why she was waiting for Reno to draw her portrait, despite knowing his skills were questionable, she replied, with irony: "He must be talented if there's a line."

She added, "I mean, what if he becomes famous someday?"

Then she mentioned, even more straight-faced this time, that she was an "art enthusiast."

And Reno, for sure, is an artist, a young Chicago one, just 26, and all that entails, doing a little this, a little that, living in Logan Square. Some acting, some performance art, a bit of stand-up, waiting tables. He radiates a rangy energy. He's thrilled to be creating anything. Maybe you know the type.

Three months ago, he had an idea that he would take a folding table to the Sunday farmers market in Logan Square and draw portraits, for $5 a pop. But with a twist. He announced his services with a handprinted sign:"Terrible Portraits. 5 Terrible Minutes."

Since that Sunday in May, he's drawn 600 or so portraits, and become so popular via social media that he's been getting requests from a number of famous faces. Questlove wants one. The day I watched him work, he cut off the line for portraits earlier than usual because he was due at the Salt Shed that afternoon, having been asked by Wilco to draw the band before their show that night. He's just started getting hired to draw his miserable portraits at weddings and birthday parties.

"The funny thing is, since starting, I'm not getting better," he told me.

No? I asked, wondering what his art looked like before it was merely terrible.

"No," he said, "I think I'm actually getting worse."

Fair enough. His repertoire, so far, is limited to faces and he's lousy at it. His heads resemble supermarket hams. His eyes look hypnotized or insane. He sketches hair with the sharp, slicing strokes a toddler might use to draw a haystack. His mustaches could be train tracks. His noses all look the same, like wine bottles. His mouths are bananas, as in the food. Like other visual artists, while he's working, he looks up to see what's in front of him, returns to his palette, looks up again – but I started to wonder if all that looking up was performative. I watched two very different friends get a joint portrait and after sitting in front of Reno for five minutes, the results were almost identical. Two long heads. Same black hair. Same sunglasses. They looked exactly like Oasis.

Celia Simon, one of those women, studied herself on the heavy poster stock that Reno uses for his portraits. She coughed out a laugh, then, on second thought, decided she loved it. "No … god, it's actually perfect," she said. "I mean, I'm going to take this to my doctor's office. I keep telling them my nose looks crooked and they're just not getting it."

Jacob Ryan Reno, a native of Redondo Beach, California, arrived in Chicago a decade ago, for college. He attended DePaul University, studied screenwriting. The origin of "Terrible Portraits," a story he's repeated many times while small-talking with whomever he's drawing, is that he and a friend from college were at a house party and decided to draw each other for fun. His friend was horrified at what Reno came up with. She asked: "Is this how you see me?" She was sort of kidding.

That was seven years ago.

Skip ahead to last spring, and Reno was slogging through a brand strategist that he decided "did not align" with his values. He also didn't like the 9-to-5 lifestyle. So he quit.

About that time, he came across the original drawing from that house party and, on a whim, decided to re-create "Terrible Portraits" in the wild, partly for the money, partly because he likes to talk to strangers, partly because it seemed fun.

"I was there first day," said Al Smart, his partner, themselves a sometime actor, sometime artist, sometime florist. "He was nervous. He was, like, 'Will people get offended? This could just be stupid.' But right away, that's not what happened. Right away, I think we kind of realized, this is a service, this is an experience. Without getting too heavy, we talked about art and how good art, no matter the medium, is about you creating for someone who is there with you – and ideally, the artist is getting just as much enjoyment from it."

Since that first attempt, a scene has sprung up every Sunday around Reno.

He sets pens in front of him. He tidies a thick sheet of paper. He waits. The other day, when I watched him make portraits – for almost three and a half hours, only taking a second to eat an empanada that had long gone cold – he was barely seated when his first client approached. Other than appearing across the street from the Logan Square Farmers Market on weekends, he pops up around Chicago during the week, at festivals, at parks. He doesn't announce where he is going on Instagram but has considered advertising his services by posting terrible self-portraits on Milwaukee Avenue that ask:"Have you seen this man?" He likes the surprise. At The 606 trail, a man stopped and asked him what he was raising money for. Reno said, "I don't know. My vibe?"

As he draws, clusters of hopeful muses hover nearby, waiting for their chance. They mutter that he looks like John Mulaney, which he definitely does. Reno places a speaker on the table and plays bebop. He wears a cravat around his neck, just like you know, artists.

Friends Abbey Londa, from left, Becca Weisz, Lauren Smith and Francesca Sands laugh as they look at the portrait Jacob Ryan Reno drew of them in Logan Square Park on Aug. 10, 2025. Reno draws "terrible" portraits of people for $5. (Eileen T. Meslar/ Chicago Tribune) No one, faced with their portraits, has gotten mad yet.

A 10-year-old boy, seeing his portrait, did scream, " ARGHHHH!" And Reno screamed back, " THE HORROR!" But mostly his clients make small talk about relationships and bike routes and apartments. They leave sly comments on the results: "Like looking in a mirror!" "It captures my beauty!" Some said they liked the low stakes. Some said they could never afford, let alone show the patience, to sit for a traditional artist portrait.

"Did you go to art school?" a man asked, sincerely.

Reno winced and said, "NOOOOOOOOOOO."

Still, a fair question. This could be a gag. Some wonder if he's secretly good. Another customer mentions to Reno what he's doing feels reminiscent of outsider art, or so-called naive art, the kind of self-trained, sometimes childlike work that's an art-world niche, filling places such as the Intuit Art Museum in West Town and the Art Preserve of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Reno's portraits are never flattering, yet they offer a consistent vision. Plus, like other outsider artists – a term Reno only recently heard for the first time – he says he does this because, well, he just does it, has never thought about getting sick of it, hoping to be considered a professional artist or evolving as an artist.

The closest Reno gets to an artist statement is when he says that anything less than spontaneous about "Terrible Portraits" would feel "antithetical to everything I'm doing with this. I'm a big believer in art everywhere, but I also think, in an age of AI-generated art and ChatGPT, I worry about if we're losing the art of communication, face to face."

He fears that a "weird tension" could develop between him and some of the people he draws, an expectation for him to draw them, as promised, as poorly as possible. He doesn't think about this as a performance.

"I am not playing a character. I actually am trying to draw people well. I hope when people sit across from me that they know that. I hope they know that I really am trying as hard as I can, but it will probably be terrible."

A couple from Lincoln Park, Abby Auwaerter and Will Morris, sat across from Reno. "You know, this is actually the second time we've sat for a portrait," Auwaerter said. The first portrait was in Key West, and it was done by the sort of traditional sidewalk sketch artist found in tourist towns.

"But that one," she continued dryly, "was not advertised as terrible."

"Yeah," added Morris, "I mean, at least you're transparent."

FOCUS

He was one of California's most notorious Mexican outlaws

Now they ride in his honor

By CLARA HARTER
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Photos by Carlin Stiehl / Los Angeles Times / TNS

Riders make their way down Rd. 9 towards Ave. 14 toward Rancho Seco on the second day of the Joaquin Murrieta ride outside of Madera on July 26 in Dairyland, California.

CANTUA CREEK, Calif. — For three days and 65 miles, the riders will travel through the heat and dust of the Central Valley to honor a man from the Gold Rush era who, depending on the point of view, was either a freedom fighter or a ruthless criminal.

Their journey begins in Cantua Creek, a rural community in Fresno County, where California Rangers claimed to have shot and killed Joaquin Murrieta in 1853. As proof, they cut off his head and pickled it in a jar.

The nearby California Historical Landmark marker declares Murrieta "a notorious bandit," but a plaque at the local convenience store hails him as "El Patrio," the patriot.

"For us Mexican horsemen, he is like our hero," explains Arturo Barajas, one of those assembling for the journey. "We can't say he's a saint, but he's pretty close."

The journey is the 46th annual three-day cabalgata, or horse pilgrimage, named after the famous Mexican cowboy who once roamed these lands. Blasting mariachi music, Barajas pulls his truck into a field behind the convenience store, where a small group of riders will spend the night. It's July 24, the eve of the 172nd anniversary of Murrieta's death.

Although Murrieta was a real person, the events of his life are wrapped in myth.

Legend says he gave stolen gold to poor Latinos after the Mexican territory of Alta California became an American state in 1850, earning him the nickname "the Robin Hood of El Dorado." His exploits are believed to have inspired the dashing fictional character of Zorro.

For the Joaquin Murrieta riders, he represents someone who stood up against U.S. oppression and demonstrates the long-standing history of Mexican people on this land.

An RV carrying the Carranza family and friends pulls into the campground next. Julieana Carranza, 19, and her brother, Emilio Carranza III, 22, grew up on the ride.

The cabalgata is the highlight of their summer. But this year a shadow looms over the celebration.

"I have multiple friends that don't want to come out and bring the horses due to their immigration status," Emilio says. "I talked to one this morning and he's like, 'I really want to go, but I'm just super scared.'"

Barajas and the Carranzas are citizens but have still felt their lives shift as the Trump administration's immigration crackdown spreads fear through Latino communities.

Julieana carries a "know your rights" red card in the back of her phone. Barajas says bookings for his business as a mariachi guitarist and singer are at an all-time low.

The sound of tires crunching across dry earth cuts through their conversation.

"La migra!" jokes Barajas as a truck's silver headlights illuminate the field where the riders are gathered.

Julieana and Emilio's father, Emilio Carranza Jr., has arrived, bringing with him a trailer carrying the family's horses: Monchis, Muchacho, Pinto, Principe and Cash.

"The purpose of the cabalgata, for me, is to teach my children our Mexican traditions, nuestras raíces mexicanas," says the elder Emilio, who serves as ride president. "It's about our roots."

Later, the riders have the first of many Vicente Fernandez karaoke sessions by the campfire. They pass around a tequila bottle, toasting " a mis ancestros" – "to my ancestors" – as they drink, until 1 a.m. approaches and Emilio Jr. calls the party to a close.

Day 1: Cantua Creek to Firebaugh

Four hours later, the Carranzas and company are up, the horses fed, watered, saddled up and exercised. Coffee is brewed and tortillas filled with sizzling chorizo and scrambled eggs as more people arrive.

From left: Andrea Torres, Itzel Ortiz and Elana Becerra hang by a trailer as riders make their way into Rancho Seco on the seance day of the Joaquin Murrieta ride on July 26 in Dairyland, California.

At 8 a.m. around two dozen participants circle up for the opening ceremony, where Julieana performs stirring renditions of the American and Mexican national anthems and Barajas delivers a passionate retelling of Murrieta's story. The group will strive to complete the 65-mile journey over the course of two 10-hour rides. Dozens more horsemen and -women will join for sections of the ride, which culminates in a rodeo.

The clip-clop of hooves ricochets off the road as the group starts off, passing rows of almond trees lining State Route 33.

The Central Valley is known as the breadbasket of America, producing around a quarter of the nation's food products thanks to a predominantly migrant labor workforce. Emilio Jr.'s parents spent summers following California's harvest across the Central Valley, periodically traveling back to Mexico, where their family owns land and horses. Now, Emilio Jr. owns a horse ranch in Lodi, Calif., Emilio III just graduated university with an economics degree, and Julieana is studying biochemistry at university.

Cars honk and drivers whoop as they pass the cowboys and cowgirls wearing sombreros, boots and rodeo belts, playing ranchera music from speakers tied to their saddles. Many recognize the ride as an annual fixture here. Others are simply impressed by all the pretty horses.

Emilio Jr. says he hopes the cabalgata sends a message: "We are here, we have been here for years, we count, we pay taxes, we want freedom."

Freedom means offering legal pathways for migrant workers, he says. "Those trees right there, they need to be harvested, they need workers."

Around midmorning the group passes the town of Three Rocks, where some 150 workers and their families used to live in trailers and manufactured homes. That was until the Fresno County Board of Supervisors declared the community a health hazard and an unwanted shantytown, shutting off the electricity to drive out residents in 1980.

That same year the first Joaquin Murrieta ride was held, starting at Three Rocks and traveling to Cantua Creek, to draw attention to the community's battle, ultimately unsuccessful, to keep their homes.

According to a 1994 pamphlet celebrating the 15th anniversary of the cabalgata,"the spirited fight against the County to stay in Three Rocks" reminded the ride founders of "Joaquin Murrieta when he took on the state of California to fight the injustices faced by his people."

Over the years, the event has evolved, adding more miles, riders and a healthy dose of merrymaking and drinking, but it still holds Murrieta's spirit of resistance at its core.

At the end of the day's ride, the crew arrives at a campground in Firebaugh and beelines for the cool relief of the San Joaquin River, with several horses joining for a dip. A local group called La Banda Favorita has been hired to provide the evening's entertainment and its rousing beats draw the riders back to dry land.

Martha Armas-Kelly, an environmental justice advocate from Merced, came to enjoy the music with her friend Isaura Perez but is shocked to discover that Perez doesn't know who Joaquin Murrieta is.

It's because they don't teach us our history in school, Armas-Kelly says.

Day 2: Firebaugh to Madera

A priest flings holy water at the horses, blessing the animals and their riders before they depart on the second leg of their journey.

Saturday's heat is intense, but the riders are supported by a small army of volunteers, lugging out buckets of water for the horses and passing around chilled bottles of Gatorade at improvised rest stops. Outside the Bonita Market, on the outskirts of Madera, the riders halt and transform the street into a Mexican block party. Many locals gather, drawn by word of mouth and posters advertising the ride.

La Banda Favorita is back, but it's the caballos bailadores, or dancing horses, who steal the show. The crowd cheers as the horses flaunt their intricately trained footwork – some trotting in place to the beat of the thumping music, others cross-stepping across the intersection with swagger.

Al Lopez Jr., a teacher and wrestling coach at South Madera High School, brought some of his athletes to observe the spectacle. He is the grandson of Jesse Lopez, who founded the Joaquin Murrieta ride in 1980 alongside Sigurdur Christopherson, known as "Mexican Sigui," and Julian Orozco.

Jesse Lopez was a respected advocate for migrant workers, who marched with Cesar Chavez and became the first Latino elected to the Madera County Board of Supervisors in 1982. He also cared deeply about keeping the culture of charros, Mexican horsemen, alive.

Al Lopez had a tough time growing up and would count down the days until he could ride out on the cabalgata with his grandpa.

"As soon as I get in the saddle, I feel free," he says. "It's my therapy more than anything."

Lopez has seen the ride's attendance fluctuate over the years. Some families had to sell their horses after the 2008 recession. Then in 2010, a disagreement among organizers resulted in the ride splitting in two. (This crew rides from Cantua Creek to Madera, while a group led by the Orozco family runs in the opposite direction.)

But both rides still carry the name of Joaquin Murrieta.

According to legend, Murrieta came to the Central Valley from Sonora, Mexico, seeking his fortune in the mining business, but was met with racism and cruelty. It's said that his brother was killed and his wife raped, fueling his transformation into an outlaw who robbed mines and stole horses.

His exploits were immortalized in a corrido, a Mexican ballad, with lines such as " A los ricos avarientos, Yo los quite su dinero" – "From the greedy rich, I take their money" – and"Ay, que leyes tan injustas, Por llamarme bandolero" – "Oh, what unjust laws, to call me a bandit."

Murrieta was reportedly shot by California Rangers Capt. Harry Love, and his severed head, preserved in a jar, was toured around the state as proof. Some question whether the head was really Murrieta's, believing that he either fled to Mexico or continued living in California under a fake name.

As the day wanes, the cue is given to pack up the party and finish the final miles of the trail. Tonight's campsite is extra special for Lopez; it's the rodeo grounds he helped his late grandfather build.

Day 3: Rodeo time

The rodeo kicks offs with Julieana singing the Murrieta corrido, relishing the lyric,"En este suelo que piso, De México es California" – "On this ground that I walk, from Mexico is California." It's one of her favorite lines, acknowledging that California was once Mexican land.

Cowboys then take turns attempting to rope a bull from horseback, but only the bravest, or craziest, among them dare participate in the next event: bull riding.

"You're literally making a life-or-death situation a choice before you get on, and it feels that way," explains Lopez, whose bull-riding days are behind him. "It's an adrenaline rush that can't be compared to any kind of drug."

The first handful of bull rides speed by, with no one withstanding the bucking for more than 4.5 seconds. Then comes Javonte Williams. A self-professed lover of bull riding from Fresno, he is determined to outlast the earlier riders.

From the second the whistle blows, it's clear his bull means business. It charges out of the pen kicking its hind legs in a feral frenzy. The beast rears its haunches so high it is practically doing a handstand on its front hooves and sends Williams flying several feet before he smashes into the ground.

The crowd sucks in a gasp as he emerges from the dust gripping a shoulder that sticks out at an unnatural angle. He wails as he staggers out of the ring and immediately starts knocking back tequila to numb the pain.

Five minutes later he announces that he has broken his collarbone, but has no regrets. "I live for this s---."

On a scale of zero to 10, Williams rates the pain a zero. "I can't really feel it," he says, as his 3-year-old daughter wraps her arms around his legs.

No one else rides a bull this day.

As the events wind down, the core group of Carranzas settle in camp chairs outside their RV and Barajas strums his trusty guitar. A cowboy rides up and belts out Antonio Aguilar's "Mi Ranchito," then trots away without a further word.

Barajas takes in the scene with a wide smile.

"I think that the heat, the dust, the manure, the sun and the stars came all together perfectly to commemorate the legend of Joaquin Murrieta," Barajas says with satisfaction. "And this was his playground."

Lopez says he's proud that so many people came out to celebrate Murrieta's memory and his grandfather's legacy, despite the fears community members feel about attending large gatherings during these fraught times.

"To be honest to God, the ride is important every year," he says. "Whether that's this year, next year, or the next president. It's our tradition, it's our culture."

FOCUS

Two hundred skydivers attempting a world-record vertical jump break apart after failing an attempt at Skydive Chicago on Aug. 20 in Ottawa.
Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune

They jump out of planes for fun
and broke an Illinois skydiving record in the process

By KALEN LUMPKINS
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

OTTAWA, Ill. — Jumping from a plane, not ideal right? Well, the divers at Skydive Chicago would tell you it's an experience everyone needs to have.

The skydivers met last week for the first time in three years to attempt record-breaking dives. More than 450 people flew out of their planes into different formations in sizes the world hadn't previously seen.

Divers flew from 19,000 feet up headfirst, mimicking a Superman flight as they shot toward the ground at 180 mph in a group of 200. They had just 60 seconds to form a predetermined snowflake, unlink hands and deploy their parachutes. Another 250 skydivers coordinated to break the 250-way Illinois state record, one where divers flew parallel to the surface.

Skydive Chicago owner Rook Nelson led the efforts. His skydiving lineage started with his grandfather, who was in the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division. The stories Nelson's father heard motivated him to skydive at 16 and start his own school. Then it was Nelson's turn.

"I don't know exactly how the story goes, but they tossed me out of an airplane when I was 4 years old," Nelson said. "I did a couple jumps as a little child, and then I started jumping in 1994 at the age of 14. You couldn't keep me out of the airplane."

He's 27,000 jumps into his skydiving career and loves it as much as the first time he felt the high-altitude air. Don't ask him his favorite jump because that would be "unjust" to the other 26,999.

"They all create different emotions," Nelson said. "I can't narrow it down to just one."

Between jumps came extended rest, training and preparation. Rook and Co. attempt these records every three years, which includes one year of rest and two years of planning and coordinating.

There's also the recruiting of skydivers, who must have at least 500 jumps under their belt and two years of experience to participate under United States Parachute Association (USPA) guidelines. It's not hard bringing back previous divers because they want to do something that never has been done.

"It takes being successful for people that are just starting out to see something like that, so now they have a goal in their skydiving career," Nelson said. "They want to set world records."

The divers share Nelson's view. After a weather delay last Tuesday, 500-plus divers relaxed in the main lobby. They talked about previous jumps, their anticipation for the jump ahead and their wishes to be able to move the clouds away. The divers motivated each other as if they knew one another, but it was quite the opposite.

Emy Delmonaco, 49, and Nick Birkner, 36, shook hands before speaking about their skydiving experience. They were all smiles and ready to talk, indicative of the skydiving community.

"It's very warm and welcoming because there's not many people that want to jump out of perfectly good airplanes," said Delmonaco, who was part of the vertical world record attempt. "It gives you something to look forward to when you first get your license. Your head is in the clouds all the time."

Added Birkner, a sergeant first class on the U.S. Army Parachute Team, known as the Golden Knights: "All of the other concerns, worries and stressors that you have out there, you don't bring that here. Everybody does it because they're passionate about it, and that's something that you can find common ground with anyone in this building. You can go up and talk to complete strangers and have an exciting, exhilarating conversation with people you've never met before."

Birkner was training to break the 250-way record. It was his first attempt, but he and Delmonaco were thinking about a successful jump. The carpet covering the auditorium's tile floors had been removed in case champagne was popped open amid a record breaker.

"We are constantly training for these different complex skydives," Birkner said. "A lot of skydivers at this level, they train to really try to take all those negatives and put them outside the head and focus, seeing it come together and then just making it true."

The Illinois horizontal-way record was 246 divers, held in part by Nelson's dad.

Safety is paramount in the preparation. Nelson said he has lost people to skydiving, his father included, so he makes sure all divers go through the correct guidelines. In 2024, the USPA reported nine skydiving deaths in an estimated 3.88 million jumps. It's a small percentage, but danger is inherent in the sport.

Last Wednesday, the divers went up for a practice jump for the 250 record. When they reached the specific height, they realized there was no oxygen on board for passengers, which required an emergency abort.

"We want to live to jump another day," Nelson said, "and the longer you're in the sport, the more you're going to see and it's not always the best things."

After three years of prep, the planes finally flew and skydivers put on their parachutes and looked down at the Earth's surface, which seems smaller 19,000 feet up. This is where the mind starts to race for participants. Take it from the guy who has done this 27,000 times: He understands the feeling.

"They probably are thinking about everything terrible that can happen, then they start riding up the airplane and it starts to become real," Nelson said. "A lot of people get the misconception that skydiving is falling, where if you've ever fallen off of something, you get that sinking sensation in your stomach. And skydiving is completely opposite.

"The parachute opens and it becomes really quiet and picturesque. You can talk to your instructor, similar to parasailing. I think everybody should try skydiving because it is such a cool thing."

The Skydive Chicago participants had unsuccessfully attempted to break the records twice since 2015.

"I literally dreamt about this," Nelson said. "It'd be really cool to win in front of my son (Rocket) to show him what that's like and to never give up. It (would) complete some unfinished business that we all have because nobody likes failure.

"I can't control when we're going to do it. I can't control if we're going to do it. But I don't want there to be any hurdles in the way."

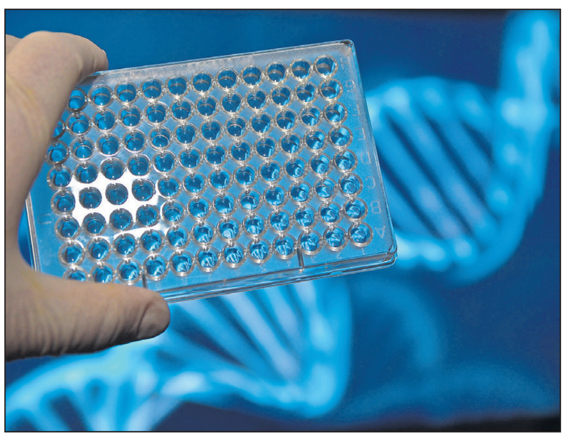
On Friday, they successfully broke the vertical world record with 174 divers. Looks like the champagne was popped after all.

Nelson grew up 60 miles from Chicago in Somonauk, a small town with a current population below 2,000. Illinois is where the Nelsons became skydiving royalty, so the world record in his home state means that much more.

"It's not only the home state, it's my skydiving center and I like doing cool things here, so it's kind of like a notch on the belt that we're able to do really cool things in Illinois," Nelson said. "People think of Illinois and they may think of farming or Chicago, and here we are setting world records."

HEALTH

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN



Dreamstime / TNS

There are reasons you might want to consider genetic testing, especially if you want to know if a health issue that runs in your family may affect your child. If you're 35 or older, you might worry about risks for genetic conditions (which rise with age).

Prenatal genetic testing and screening: What to consider

By SAMANTHA VERGANO, MD, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

When you're expecting a baby, you can also expect to have lots of medical tests. Ultrasound imaging, glucose monitoring and other health checks are a routine part of every pregnancy.

There are reasons you might want to consider genetic testing too, especially if you want to know if a health issue that runs in your family may affect your child. If you're 35 or older, you might worry about risks for genetic conditions (which rise with age).

Whatever your concerns, keep in mind that genetic testing is 100 percent optional. Your decision may reflect your personal beliefs, your family health history and the advice of your health care team.

Typical humans have 26 pairs of chromosomes in every cell. Pairs are formed during conception, when egg and sperm cells come together. One chromosome comes from the mother and one from the father, making matched pairs totaling 46 chromosomes in all.

Variations in the matching process can have a major impact on a child's health. Babies born with an extra chromosome 21 usually have Down syndrome, a condition that changes their facial features, muscle tone, learning abilities and more. In other cases, children can inherit a gene that causes a specific illness. Sickle cell disease is one example of single-gene conditions present at birth. However, both parents would need to be carrying the gene in order for sickle cell to present itself.

Every child born with a genetic condition is different. Some have brain differences that affect learning and development while others have body parts or systems that are formed differently and may not function well. In some cases, genetic disorders cause miscarriage or stillbirth. Still, some have no serious health issues at all.

Prenatal genetic testing supports parents by offering them the gift of time. Knowing beforehand that their child might be born with a health issue or genetic condition can help them cope with powerful emotions and seek much-needed support. It also helps parents make key decisions about their baby's care. Testing can even uncover serious conditions such as a malfunctioning heart – that neonatal surgeons can treat before babies are born.

Health conditions that prenatal genetic testing can reveal include aneuploidy (too many chromosomes), such as Down syndrome, monosomies (missing chromosomes) like Turner syndrome, microdeletions like Williams syndrome that happen when a chromosome or part of a chromosome are missing, and single-gene conditions such as cystic fibrosis, which occurs in the same way sickle cell does with recessive genes from both parents.

Prenatal genetic tests fall into two groups, based on what test results might show. Screening tests use a sample of the pregnant parent's blood to look for elevated risks of genetic conditions. Diagnostic tests go one step further by sampling fluid and tissues inside the womb to gain access to your baby's DNA. These tests can confirm a specific diagnosis.

Biological parents can also be screened before or after conception to see if they are "carriers" for health conditions that run in families. Some parents carry these health risks without knowing it. Both parents should be tested, since babies of two carrier parents have a higher likelihood of being diagnosed with the condition. Carrier screening is not required for future pregnancies, since the results will be noted in each parent's medical records.

Early blood tests on a pregnant parent may be able to detect a higher risk of certain conditions, predominately those that result in too few or too many chromosomes (Turner syndrome or Down syndrome). This test is often referred to as NIPT/S (non-invasive prenatal testing/screening). This only determines a risk and does not provide a definitive diagnosis.

Prenatal genetic testing is a personal choice, but the process of deciding can cause confusion and stress. If you're unsure, talk with your health care team. Your OB-GYN or pediatrician can answer common questions about genetic testing – both the benefits and limitations. Parents can also meet with a genetic counselor to review family risks and learn more about the value of genetic testing.

Your health care team, which might include a genetic counselor or geneticist, can help you make informed decisions about testing and your child's health.

Remember, having a child with a genetic condition does not change their worth as an individual or how much you love them.

Samantha Vergano, MD, FAAP is the chair of the AAP Committee on Genetics and serves as the Associate Medical Director for Outpatient Services in the Division of Genetic Medicine at Seattle Children's Hospital.

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

Are backpacks hurting your kids' backs?

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: For my kids, the best part of back-to-school shopping is picking out a new backpack. While I want them to have backpacks they like, I also want to make sure they have features that support their backs. What should I look for?

ANSWER: The backpack is as much a part of school life as homework, pencils and recess. Kids use backpacks to carry everything they need during the day and make a fashion statement. Unfortunately, the excess weight of supplies stuffed into an improperly worn backpack may lead to sore joints and muscles.

As a new school year begins, follow these tips to help kids take a load off to keep their backs healthy:

Limit the weight.

Students of all ages seem to carry heavier loads in their backpacks. They often tote a day's worth of textbooks, a change of clothing for after-school activities, school projects and lunch. As a result, many parents have heard their school-age children complaining of back pain.

Overall, adults and children shouldn't carry more than 15 percent of their body weight in a backpack. For a 60-pound child, that means a pack weighing less than 9 pounds.

Even when worn properly, your student may need to lean forward to compensate for extra backpack weight. This can affect the natural curve in the lower back. Extra weight also can cause a rounding of the shoulders and an increased curve of the upper back. As a result, children may experience back, shoulder and neck pain.

Adjust them properly.

When worn properly, backpacks are the best way to carry things, especially for long periods of time.

Backpacks should be worn using both straps. Slinging a backpack over one shoulder can cause a person to lean to one side to compensate for the uneven weight, causing a curve in the spine. Over time, this can lead to lower and upper back pain, strained shoulders and neck, and even functional scoliosis (curvature of the spine). Teenage girls are especially susceptible to scoliosis.

Tighten the straps so the pack sits high on your child's back with the top of the pack about even with the shoulder blades. It also should be snug, so it doesn't sway side to side while walking.

When properly worn, the back and abdominal muscles support a backpack. These are the strongest muscles in the body, stabilizing the trunk and holding the body in proper postural alignment. Improper backpack use presents some dangers to young, still-growing joints and muscles.

Key features

Urge your children to look past the color or design when selecting a backpack. These features can make a significant difference in how they feel while wearing the pack at school:

■ **Wide straps:** Wide, padded straps won't dig into the shoulders, and they're more comfortable. Narrow straps can hinder circulation, causing numbness or tingling in the arms, which may lead to weakness in the hands over time.

■ Multiple sections: Select a backpack with many pockets and sections to keep children organized. This also helps distribute the weight more evenly across the pack.

■ **Waist belt:** Tightening the waist belt helps to evenly distribute the weight of the backpack and support children's abdominal muscles.

■ **Lightweight when empty:** Consider the weight of the backpack when it's empty so your children don't have additional weight beyond books and supplies. For example, a canvas backpack will be lighter than leather.

■ **Reflective material:** If your children walk or bike to school, look for a backpack with reflective strips that make them more noticeable to drivers. You also can add strips of reflective tape at home.

Encourage your children to wear their backpacks properly. To help keep them light, they should make frequent stops at their lockers throughout the day to avoid carrying all their books at once. And leave nonessentials at home.

If they're in pain or have discomfort, talk with their primary care clinicians before a problem becomes serious.

– Michelle Rein, M.D., Family Medicine, Mayo Clinic Health System, Caledonia, Minnesota

Dreamstime / TNS

The backpack is as much a part of school life as homework, pencils and recess.

Kennedy's anti-vaccine strategy risks forcing shots off market, manufacturers warn

By STEPHANIE ARMOUR
KFF Health News (TNS)

Dining under palm trees on a patio at Mar-a-Lago in December, President-elect Donald Trump reassured chief executives at pharmaceutical giants Eli Lilly and Pfizer that anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. wouldn't be a radical choice to head the Department of Health and Human Services.

"I think he's going to be much less radical than you would think," Trump said later that month during a news conference at his Palm Beach, Florida, resort.

Eight months have passed, and Kennedy is intensifying his attacks on the vaccine system.

High on his list of targets: a federal vaccine compensation program that settles injury claims. His strategy could bankrupt or diminish the fund, some legal scholars and public health leaders say, saddling pharmaceutical companies with liability risks and costs that would compel them to stop making vaccines altogether.

"It's a radical agenda," said Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. "He's using a bunch of different mechanisms and there really are no guardrails. People are going to catch on but it's not going to be enough to stop the waves of deaths, and deaths of children."

Kennedy has said changes to the U.S. vaccine system are needed because, he asserts without evidence, immunizations are linked to autism, neurotoxicity, allergies, and death. He is a leader of the "Make America Healthy Again" movement, an informal campaign that eschews traditional medicine and espouses "medical freedom." Many adherents oppose vaccines and believe they are unsafe despite scientific evidence to the contrary.

Kennedy has acknowledged he wants to reform the vaccine fund, known as the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, writing July 28 on the social platform X that "the VICP is broken, and I intend to fix it." HHS is working with the Department of Justice to revamp the program, which shields drugmakers from most liability over injuries.

HHS didn't respond to a request to speak with Kennedy, but agency officials said he isn't opposed to immunizations.

"Secretary Kennedy is not anti-vaccine – he is pro-safety, pro-transparency, and pro-accountability," HHS spokesperson Vianca Rodriguez Feliciano said in an email.

Yet behind the scenes, Kennedy has been laying the groundwork to restrict the availability of widely used immunizations, according to people familiar with internal discussions who asked not to be identified because they're not authorized to speak on the topic.

A multi-pronged strategy

The strategy began taking shape in the spring. The first step: Raise unfounded questions about the safety of vaccines. At a Cabinet meeting in April, Kennedy told Trump that HHS was undertaking a massive study that would identify the cause of rising autism diagnoses by September.

Kennedy tasked David Geier, a researcher who's repeated the debunked claim that vaccines cause autism, to oversee the work, according to media reports.

Kennedy then doubled down by questioning the use of aluminum, which is added to many vaccines to help boost the immune response. He linked it to allergies at a July meeting of governors, even though a recent study in the Annals of Internal Medicine found no connection. He's widely expected to ask a federal vaccine advisory committee to conduct a review.

The autism research and concerns about aluminum were early salvos in the push to go after the compensation fund, according to two of the people.

That fund provides money to people for injuries from vaccines and has paid out more than $5 billion since it was established in 1988, according to the Health Resources and Services Administration.

Before filing a lawsuit in court, injured individuals bring their claims to the program's nonjury vaccine court, which reviews evidence. The fund provides compensation from a small excise tax on vaccines.

Compensation is determined in part by a table maintained by HRSA and overseen by the HHS secretary. It lists each vaccine and associated injuries and encompasses routine vaccinations recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that are subject to the excise tax. The injuries include anaphylaxis and encephalitis. People who experience such injuries within a certain time after getting a specific vaccine can get money.

Kennedy wants to get autism or allergies added to that document, according to two people familiar with internal discussions and concerns raised publicly by some vaccine developers and former regulators. He could accomplish the goal if HHS-led research blames vaccines for autism, for example, or if a federal vaccine advisory panel recommends against aluminum in vaccines, according to some legal scholars.

"Given the rate of autism, if a lot of cases are brought, that could bankrupt the program," said Dorit Reiss, a professor at University of California Law San Francisco.

If that were to happen, pharmaceutical companies could stop producing the immunizations, which don't tend to be very profitable, rather than get entangled in drawn-out, expensive lawsuits from claimants who can't get money because the federal vaccine injury fund has run dry, some legal experts and vaccine developers said.

"The compensation fund, if it's gone, would impact decisions to proceed or not to proceed," said David Dodd, president and CEO of GeoVax Labs, a biotechnology company developing vaccines and immunotherapies.

A federal vaccine advisory panel could also recommend against aluminum in shots, forcing drugmakers to make costly reformulations or exit the market.

Kennedy has placed people around him to execute the strategy. He's pushed to get vaccine skeptics in decision-making positions at the CDC, which recommends vaccines, and the Food and Drug Administration, which approves them.

He also tapped leaders in the anti-vaccine movement to vet candidates for him.

The outcome has been regulatory and policy decisions that have winnowed vaccine access and development.

HHS this month said it was halting $500 million in grants and contracts for the development of mRNA vaccines, including an improved, more durable COVID mRNA vaccine.

The federal government stopped recommending COVID shots for healthy pregnant women and children, bypassing input from a vaccine advisory committee that traditionally would have weighed in.

And Kennedy reconstituted that committee with his own handpicked members, including vaccine skeptics, and removed the American Medical Association, American Nurses Association, and other industry groups that served as committee liaisons. The modified panel recommended against flu vaccines containing a preservative erroneously linked to autism.

The White House calls

Kennedy's determination to keep vaccine skeptics in oversight positions played out in a deal he recently made with Trump and his staff, according to two people familiar with the situation. The arrangement came together on a Sunday night in July when Kennedy got a call from the White House.

The subject was Vinay Prasad, a top vaccine regulator at the FDA. He had recently touched off a wave of industry criticism for playing a role in the agency's decision to ask biotech company Sarepta Therapeutics to halt shipments of a gene therapy over safety concerns.

Social media posts and conservative commentators whipped up a furor. Laura Loomer, a far-right provocateur, said July 21 on X that Prasad should be fired and called him "a self-proclaimed progressive liberal and Bernie Sanders fanboy," referring to Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.). Congressional lawmakers began peppering the White House with questions.

The furor reached Trump, who wanted Prasad out, according to the people. But Kennedy was concerned about losing Prasad. He felt he needed a critic of immunizations overseeing vaccines at the agency.

So Kennedy struck a deal. Prasad would be asked to resign as head of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, which regulates vaccine products and biologics such as gene therapies. And the center would be divided into two operations, with Kennedy empowered to select the person overseeing vaccines.

Some public health leaders publicly shared details of the arrangement and raised concerns about its potential impact. Former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said in an Aug. 1 interview on CNBC that he thought it "would be very destructive to the agency."

After leaving the agency in July, Prasad is now returning, though it is unclear if his role has changed.

Recently, Kennedy was sued by Ray Flores, senior outside counsel for Children's Health Defense. An anti-vaccine group founded by Kennedy, Children's Health Defense is funding the suit, which claims Kennedy failed to launch a task force to study vaccine safety that it says is required to report findings to Congress. But Kennedy and his allies view the lawsuit as friendly, according to one person familiar with the matter, because it is seeking an outcome that he wants.

HHS on Aug. 14 announced it was reviving a federal panel, disbanded in 1998, to provide oversight of pediatric vaccines.

Kennedy's work against vaccines has triggered unfriendly lawsuits too, including one brought by the American Academy of Pediatrics and other public health groups. His recent decision to halt funds for mRNA vaccine development yielded a swell of social media criticism.

"This is reckless. This is dangerous. This will cost lives. We must fight back," Sen. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) said Aug. 5 on X.

"I've tried to be objective & non-alarmist in response to current HHS actions – but quite frankly this move is going to cost lives," Jerome Adams, who was U.S. surgeon general during the previous Trump administration, said Aug. 5 on the same platform.

Kennedy and his backers remain undeterred. In a counterpunch, his supporters are launching an unprecedented public relations campaign to promote the HHS secretary, spurring speculation that he may be mulling a 2028 presidential run.

The nonprofit MAHA Action held a call in July to energize Kennedy supporters and initiated a six-figure ad campaign extolling Kennedy and Trump administration health initiatives.

"Make no mistake, this is a revolution that will change the face of public health policy," Tony Lyons, president of MAHA Action, said in a statement. "Americans are demanding radical transparency and gold standard science."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

FINANCE

Fizkes / Dreamstime / TNS

Being debt-free isn't just about finances – it's about freedom from obligations.

Life after debt

Five side effects of debt freedom

By BERNADETTE JOY
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Just seven months after graduating from business school, I made the final payment on my $72,000 student loan balance. It wasn't easy – it took extra hustle, long days and sacrifice – but I wouldn't trade it for the world. I thought our journey to debt payoff would be done after we paid off the student loans, but we took it a step further. We paid off our house, too, and have been debt-free ever since.

When you become debt-free, there won't be any fireworks or confetti (unless you throw your own party). But something major shifts. Not just in your finances, but in your mental health, your relationships and the way you strive and dream.

I thought that becoming debt-free was the finish line – but it became the starting point for a whole new life. Here are five things that really change after you kick debt to the curb, and what you need to know to get there.

1. You make more decisions based on joy, not fear

Before: "Can I afford this?"

After: "Do I truly want this?"

Nearly two-thirds of credit cardholders (64 percent) who carry a balance from month to month say their debt has caused them to postpone or skip other financial decisions, according to Bankrate's 2025 Credit Card Debt Report. Carrying a large amount of debt kept me in a state of constant survival mode – I had to postpone my dreams rather than chase them.

Once you're debt-free, you shift from reacting to choosing. The anxiety around money may not dissipate completely, but it definitely eases, and you start making decisions based on joy and peace, not guilt.

How to get there

Even if you're wholly focused on paying off debt, you don't have to feel guilty about every little purchase. Instead of asking, "Is this in my budget?" ask, "Does this align with the life I'm building now?" Sometimes, a little treat is worth it if it keeps you motivated and helps you avoid burnout during debt payoff.

My budget includes a "Little Luxuries" line item, where I pay myself back 5 percent for hitting my debt payoff targets. For example, while I was paying off my student loans, I still allowed myself the occasional bubble tea or weekend activity, knowing that I'd planned for it ahead of time. I only allowed those small indulgences if I had already hit my monthly debt payment target. For every $1,000 I paid, I allowed myself $50 to celebrate along the way.

2. You get your time (and sleep) back

Being debt-free can mean fewer hours staying up late crunching numbers, hustling for your next payday or feeling mired in anxiety. Fewer jobs, fewer side hustles and less mental clutter.

Dr. Darla Bishop, author of How To Afford Everything, shares, "Debt rents space in your mind. Paying it off is like reclaiming gorgeous lakefront real estate. Paying off debt means not having desperate energy around money; things just flow better."

According to Bankrate's Money and Mental Health Survey, Americans who say money is impacting their mental health are three times more likely to have paid a bill late over the past month. Debt can create a vicious cycle – when you have more bills to catch up on, it can make you feel stressed and broke, and feeling broke can discourage you from keeping track of all the bills.

This was certainly true for me when the student loan payments began – the financial stress loomed over me like a dark cloud. But rather than accept decades of payments, I opted for a few years of intense work, saving and budgeting. Financial freedom was waiting on the other side.

In hindsight, I wish I had slowed my pace a little. Taking a few extra months to pay off my debt would still have been worth celebrating, and I could have used the extra sleep to build my business and make better money choices with a fresh set of eyes. As with anything, balance is key.

How to get there

Use the time you used to spend worrying or working overtime to rest, recharge or refine your monthly budget instead. I advise my clients to spend no more than five minutes of their monthly budgeting routine rehashing the past that can't be undone, and instead, focusing on what they can control in the next month.

3. You change who you listen to (and hang with)

When you're in debt, there is no shortage of people eager to tell you that it's normal. But debt is a short-term solution – it doesn't have to be a long-term lifestyle. Once you're debt-free, you realize that a lot of those voices don't apply anymore.

Our society has normalized debt to such an extent that we often forget there are people out there who are debt-free. Amplify these voices in your social media feed and around your dinner table.

When I first started paying off my student loans, I decided to post about my payoff journey on Instagram. I was astounded by the number of people who shared my struggle, but also the surprisingly few people who offered me tips or words of encouragement. It seemed as though everyone knew what it was like to be trapped by debt, but no one had reached the other side.

How to get there

Find one person in your daily life who is debt-free, and one person online who regularly talks about their debt-free lifestyle. The more you surround yourself with those who share your values and goals, the more likely you are to prioritize your debt payoff journey.

Instead of following influencers on social media flaunting vacations and cars, I followed debt-free leaders I admired, particularly women of color like Bola Sokunbi of "Clever Girl Finance" and Stefanie Gonzalez of "Permission To Be Wealthy." Instead of taking financial advice from my father, who had a lot of debt, I listened to my debt-free uncle's words of financial wisdom.

4. You redefine 'enough'

Once I achieved debt freedom, I started learning about the FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early) movement and prioritized investing and saving. Instead of only contributing up to my employer's match in my 401(k), I started contributing the maximum limit and matching myself as my own employer.

A big epiphany came the day I realized that my paycheck felt so much bigger when I didn't have car loans, student loans or mortgage payments coming out. My income hadn't changed, but my debt payoff plan felt manageable once I started paying off smaller debts.

Before long, debt freedom had shifted my definition of health and wealth. It's not just about the material things you can buy – peace becomes the new flex.

How to get there

Identify your lowest balance debt account – it could be a credit card, a personal loan or one of your student loans. Aim to pay it off in the next three months or sooner. When you zero out the balance, apply that monthly payment toward your next financial goal. This is called the debt snowball method of debt payoff, and it can be a great way to build momentum toward being debt-free.

5. You don't just have goals, you focus on dreams

According to Bankrate's Credit Card Debt Report, 46 percent of credit cardholders report having a credit card balance, and 23 percent don't believe they'll ever pay it off. But there's good news: You don't have to treat debt like a foregone conclusion.

When I finished digging myself out of the debt hole, I was finally on what felt like flat ground. That's when I started asking, "What do I really want now?" This is when strive mode kicks in.

I was surprised to learn that one of my biggest goals – to own a home outright – wasn't my dream anymore. Instead, I'm living my new dream: teaching financial education in my community and across the country, traveling with my husband for weeks at a time and going to as many K-Pop concerts as I can manage.

Ericka Young, host of the For Better and Worth podcast, shared that paying off $90,000 of debt changed her family legacy. "My husband and I feel less pressure around money conversations because they're not solely around debt and other stressors. It made room for us to do the things for our kids we couldn't do for ourselves before."

How to get there

Write down three things you think are "impossible" while in debt, but frame them as though they are within reach. Post these dreams where you can see them as you work on your monthly budget. Even better, share them with a friend who you know would encourage you to try.

Final thoughts: Debt freedom is the freedom to say no

Being debt-free isn't just about finances – it's about freedom from obligations. You're free to say yes to new opportunities. Free to say no to situations that burn you out. Free to rest. Free to dream.

The best part? You get to choose what happens next, and it doesn't have to look like anyone else's version of success.

You won't just pay off debt. You will buy back years of your life. Spend it well.

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Michael M. Santiago / Getty Images / TNS

Overlooked securities can offer the potential for outsize profits as other investors eventually find a hidden gem and bid it up. Stock market numbers are displayed at the New York Stock Exchange during morning trading on Aug. 22 in New York City.

5 of the most overlooked investments right now

By JAMES ROYAL, PH.D.
Bankrate.com (TNS)

The S&P 500 has had a nice run over the last few years, and the big-name tech stocks that everyone knows – Apple, Microsoft and Nvidia, among others – have led the charge higher. But which stocks may have been unfairly overlooked in that fast-and-furious rally? Below are some timely suggestions, as well as some perennial spots for finding value stocks in a bull market.

5 SECTORS OF THE STOCK MARKET THAT MAY BE OVERLOOKED

Everyone knows the virtues of tech stocks. They offer highly scalable platforms that can throw off billions of dollars if they can grow, so the best tech stocks are rarely on sale. Instead, even the largest tech stocks are still somehow growing at the pace of growth stocks, despite being among the market's trillion-dollar companies. But investors do have some value-priced picks.

1. Banks

ELEVATOR PITCH: With short-term interest rates poised to move lower, banks may be poised to outperform, especially since valuations are not stretched.

Banks often get overlooked because they're not super-fast growers, and, well… they're not tech stocks, which really do tend to overshadow everything. At the moment, these financials may be well positioned because the Fed seems poised to lower interest rates. In other words, the cost of the key ingredient for many banks is primed to decline, so their profit is likely to expand. Banks also benefit from the favorable regulatory climate under the Trump administration, which encourages consolidation, and consolidation has been a supertrend for 40 years in the U.S.

Rather than try to pick individual stocks, you can buy one of the best financials ETFs or go with a bank ETF, such as SPDR S&P Regional Banking ETF (KRE), which includes more than 100 stocks and should perform well as rates slide.

2. Thrift conversions

ELEVATOR PITCH: In the world of these tiny banks, the name of the game is being acquired, and these diminutive banks trade at substantial discounts, making them low risk.

The market has a ton of tiny banks called thrifts or mutual conversions, which have undertaken an IPO to become publicly traded. These banks trade cheaply, they often tend to repurchase their own stock at a discount, and they're often acquired at a premium. Thrifts are relatively low risk, and their low valuation means investors are often paying less than the net value of the stock (the price after you subtract all the liabilities from the assets). Even better, executives often recognize this misvaluation and use some of the thrift's cash – they have a ton of it due to the recent IPO – to buy back the stock and improve the return on the remaining shares.

After three years of being public, a thrift can be acquired and that often happens, usually at a significant premium to the bank's net assets. While thrifts are not especially attractive banks – they're competitively disadvantaged – they can make attractive acquisitions candidates for regional banks that want to grow. The U.S. bank landscape has been consolidating for years, but there are still thousands of financial institutions out there that are likely to be taken over.

3. Spin-offs

ELEVATOR PITCH: Spin-offs are one of the best places to consistently look for mispriced stocks, and it's possible to find some hidden gems being spun to the market with little fanfare.

Spin-offs have been a great hunting ground for savvy investors for years. A spin-off is like an IPO but without selling the stock. The company simply gives shares in one of its businesses to investors, so they end up owning shares directly in both. The spun-off company may offer a variety of attractive qualities – fast-growing, profitable, value-priced – and it may be hidden from most investors for months, until its filings begin to appear. Meanwhile, investors often receive a relatively few number of shares and decide to simply sell the spin-off rather than investigate.

One of the other big advantages of spin-offs is that they're not hyped to the moon the way that IPOs are. While the Wall Street money machine pumps up this year's hot IPOs, spin-offs may fly under the radar at a lower valuation, sometimes in part because insiders want to acquire shares. Following the insiders and understanding why they're buying from and selling to the public may give you a good indication of where there's value in the stock market.

You can see more about spin-offs in this list of the best investment books of all time.

4. Stocks hitting 52-week lows

ELEVATOR PITCH: This year's dog is next year's darling. Stocks that bounce around on the 52-week-lows list don't get any love, but they often spring back to life when the year changes.

One great place to begin your search for outperforming stocks is to look at a list of the biggest losers: stocks hitting the list of 52-week lows. These stocks are sitting at their lowest level in 52 weeks, and while this dubious distinction doesn't mean that they're primed to go up, it does mean that a lot of the speculative excess has been knocked out of their price. These stocks often have a kind of "stain" on them after they become losers, which keeps other investors from buying them for a while, ensuring that these stocks fall well below their actual long-term value.

Of course, the market always has plenty of junk stocks, so it can be valuable to search for 52-week lows among the market's larger stocks, say, in the S&P 500 index. By sticking to larger stocks, you'll have companies with more financial resources that may simply have fallen out of favor. A word of warning: Don't be too eager to dash for stocks hitting lows, since they often still have more room to fall before they settle out. You often have plenty of time to get back in.

In fact, Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway recently made a purchase of UnitedHealthcare, which was featured on our list of the worst-performing S&P 500 stocks after falling 50 percent.

5. Out-of-favor sectors: Oil and gas, health care and cloud computing

ELEVATOR PITCH: It's the "best house in a bad neighborhood" strategy, but one where the neighborhood may become good again – find the best performers in an out-of-favor industry.

The stock market goes through regular cycles, and some stocks become cheaper just because their sector is not favored right now, though it may bounce back in the future. So by looking for an out-of-favor sector, you can find the "best of breed" company that will fare well when the sector returns again to investors' good graces. However, sectors may go out of fashion and stay that way for quite a while, so it's important to understand the dynamics moving the sector. Stocks are sometimes cheap for a good reason, and that reason may cause "permanent impairment."

As of August, some of the worst-performing sectors are oil equipment and services, health care and cloud computing. This underperformance doesn't make any of these sectors' stocks a buy, but it does suggest that these areas may be ripe for exploration to see who might be worth buying if and when their stock is hammered. If you want to downshift to buying the sector (instead of the best player in it), you can try funds such as best energy ETFs or best health care ETFs, though each has various sub-sectors, so you need to know what you're buying.

Bottom line

Overlooked securities can offer the potential for outsize profits as other investors eventually find a hidden gem and bid it up. With these approaches, you can find stocks apt to outperform, even if they don't all do so, but you'll need to do the research if you're buying individual stocks.

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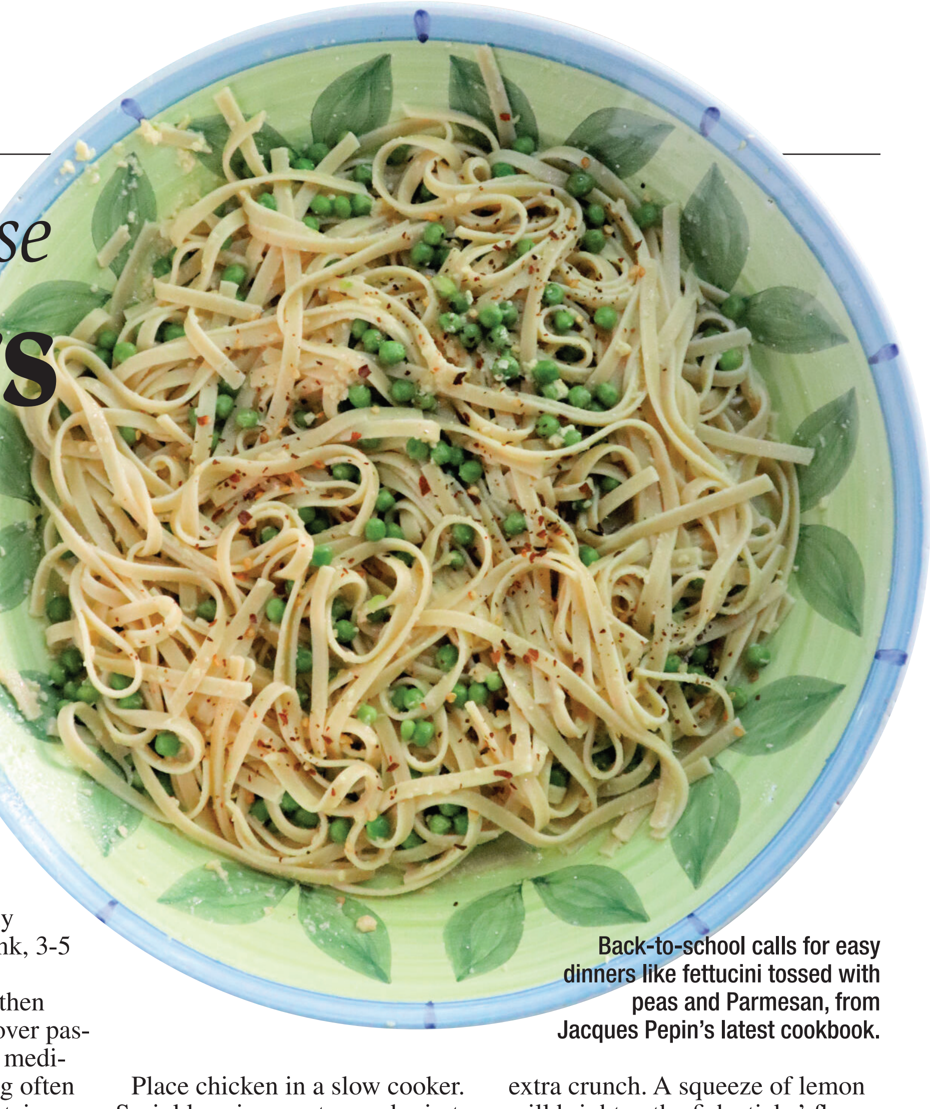
FOOD

Back-to-school time is easy with these
4 no-stress dinners



Back-to-school calls for easy dinners like fettucini tossed with peas and Parmesan, from Jacques Pepin's latest cookbook.

By GRETCHEN McKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

'Back to school" can release a floodgate of emotions for parents.

We feel all the positive anticipation that goes with embarking on new adventures – it's thrilling to see a child begin kindergarten or enter the senior year of high school – but starting a new academic year also brings a lot of anxiety.

The lazier routines of summer have to be reset, so the pressure's on.

Bed times change, homework has to be managed and there's a lot more laundry. If you eat as a family (and research shows you definitely should), you also have to figure out what to make for dinner after a long day that starts with packing lunches and probably also includes sports practices and other extracurricular activities.

The best weeknight meals, then, are ones that come together with minimal prep and a fairly short cooking time. Some can be largely prepared ahead or in batches – say in a slow cooker – and simply reheated.

Choosing recipes that don't have you running all around town for an unusual ingredient also helps, as does picking one-pan dishes that guarantee easy cleanup.

Make a big pot of soup, for instance, and you can portion it out over several nights, freeze it for future meals, or portion it into a thermos for lunches.

We can't help with separation anxiety or the stress of suddenly being over-scheduled in a new school year. (We've all been through it and feel your pain.) But we can help home cooks get a decent, economical dinner on the table in short fashion on a busy school night when there's so much more to do than prepare dinner.

These four dinners can be assembled in a half-hour or less (one cooks all day long in a slow cooker) and use everyday ingredients. They include a meaty skillet lasagna that doesn't require boiling noodles in water; homemade fish sticks coated in a crunchy mix of panko and Parmesan; a four-ingredient fettuccine dish that makes the most of frozen baby peas; and a slow cooker chicken tortilla soup that marries boneless chicken breasts with fire-roasted tomatoes and the gentle heat of chipotle peppers in adobo.

Knowing no one likes to cook every night of the week, we saved Friday night for takeout!

Noodles and Peas

Preparing a big bowl of pasta is always a great way to get dinner on the table in a hurry. This recipe from French chef Jacques Pepin's upcoming book, "The Art of Jacques Pepin: The Cookbook" (Harvest, $35) is an easy, satisfying and comforting dish that everyone in the family will enjoy.

It may be the easiest pasta dish imaginable: The sauce has just four main ingredients – grated Parmesan, olive oil, peas and some of the cooking water from the pasta.

I also tried this recipe using heavy cream instead of olive oil, with an additional tablespoon of grated Parmesan. If you love your pasta creamy, that's the way to go.

12 ounces fettuccine
1 cup frozen petite peas
3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese, or more to taste
2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Bring 3 quarts of salted water to a boil in a large saucepan or pot and add pasta.

Mix well, bring the water back to boil and cook, uncovered, 10-12 minutes, depending on your preference.

Meanwhile, place frozen peas in a strainer, then run them under hot tap water until the ice particles have melted and they are thawed.

Place peas in a large serving bowl with the cheese, olive oil, salt and pepper.

When the pasta is cooked, remove 2/3 cup of the cooking liquid and add it to the bowl with the peas. Drain the pasta and add it to the bowl.

Toss well and serve immediately, with more cheese if desired.

Serves 4.

– "The Art of Jacques Pepin: The Cookbook"

Meaty Skillet Lasagna

This quick version of an old-time favorite goes from cupboard to table in less than a half-hour. Yet it doesn't sacrifice on taste.

The ingredient list looks long, but that's only because there are three cheeses. Most everything else is a pantry item.

3 14.5-ounce cans whole peeled tomatoes
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 medium onion, minced
Salt
3 medium garlic cloves, minced
Generous pinch (or two) red pepper flakes
1 pound meatloaf mix (ground beef, pork and veal) or 1/2 pound each of ground pork and ground beef
10 curly edged lasagna noodles, broken into 2-inch lengths (do not substitute no-boil noodles)
1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
Ground black pepper
3/4 cup ricotta cheese
3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

Pulse tomatoes with their juice in a food processor until coarsely ground and no large pieces remain.

Heat oil in a 12-inch nonstick pan over medium heat. Add onion and 1/2 teaspoon salt and cook until softened, 5-7 minutes. Stir in garlic and pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add meat and cook, breaking apart, until lightly browned and no longer pink, 3-5 minutes.

Scatter pasta over meat, then pour processed tomatoes over pasta. Cover, increase heat to medium-high, and cook, stirring often and adjusting heat to maintain a vigorous simmer, until pasta is tender, about 29 minutes.

Off the heat, stir in half of the mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses. Season with salt and pepper. Dot heaping tablespoons of ricotta over the noodles, then sprinkle with remaining cheese. Cover and let stand off heat until cheese melts, 2-4 minutes. Sprinkle with basil and serve.

Serves 4.

– Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Slow Cooker Chicken Tortilla Soup

One of my daughters' favorite dishes is homemade tortilla soup. Usually I make it with a sweet and smoky ancho chili and roasted tomato puree. But in this recipe, all ingredients go into a slow cooker at the same time to simmer all day.

I like to add thinly sliced corn tortillas to the soup to thicken it, and also fry some in hot oil for a crunchy, low-cost topping. But the soup also can be served with bagged tortilla chips.

1 1/2 pounds boneless chicken breasts
1 tablespoon chipotle chili powder
1 heaping teaspoon cumin
Salt and pepper, to taste
1 medium white onion, chopped
1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped, optional
3 14.5-ounce cans fire-roasted tomatoes
1 (10-ounce) can diced tomatoes and green chilies, such as Rotel
32-ounce chicken broth or stock
4 ounces tomato paste
1 whole chipotle pepper in adobo, smashed
1/4 cup vegetable oil, for frying
10 white or yellow corn tortillas, sliced into 1/4 -inch strips
Juice 1 lime, plus lime wedges for serving
Sliced avocado, cilantro leaves and/or grated cheddar cheese, for serving
Fried corn tortilla strips, for serving

Place chicken in a slow cooker. Sprinkle spices on top and mix to combine.

Add chopped onion and bell pepper, tomatoes, tomatoes and green chilies, chicken broth, tomato paste and chipotle pepper in adobo.

Mix well to combine, place the lid on the slow cooker and set heat on low for 8 hours.

Remove cooked chicken from the cooker and allow to cool. Then, use two forks or your fingers to shred it into bite-sized pieces.

Add chicken back to pot, along with sliced corn tortillas. Cook another 10 minutes.

In a large skillet, heat canola oil over medium-high heat and fry tortilla strips until lightly browned around the edges, about 45 seconds. Transfer to paper towels to drain.

When soup is ready to serve, stir in lime juice. Season to taste with additional salt or pepper, if needed.

Ladle into bowls, and top with a handful of tortilla strips. Each person can add avocados, a squeeze of lime juice, cheese and cilantro according to taste.

Serves 8.

– Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Homemade Baked Fish Sticks

Kids might say they hate fish, but slice a fresh fillet into planks, add a crunchy coating and suddenly it's delicious. I used cod for these homemade fish sticks, but any firm and meaty white fish will work. You could use salmon for a stronger "fish" taste.

An added plus: Homemade fish sticks can be stored in the freezer for up to 2 months, and reheated in the oven or air fryer, so they're perfect for batch cooking.

Ketchup is the standard dipping sauce for kids, but homemade tartar sauce (I make it with mayonnaise, pickle relish, lemon juice and yellow mustard) works, too.

I used panko bread crumbs for extra crunch. A squeeze of lemon will brighten the fish sticks' flavor.

1 1/2 pounds cod or other firm fish fillet
Salt and black pepper
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon sweet paprika
3/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 eggs, beaten with 1 tablespoon water
3/4 cup panko bread crumbs
3/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
Zest of 1 lemon
Vegetable or extra virgin olive oil, for pan
Lemon wedges, for serving
Ketchup and/or tartar sauce, for serving

Preheat oven to 450 degrees and lightly coat a baking sheet with oil.

Pat fish fillets dry with a paper towel and generously season both sides with kosher salt. Cut fillets into long, fat sticks (1- to 1 1/2-inch thick and about 3 inches long).

In a small bowl, combine black pepper, dried oregano and paprika. Season fish sticks on both sides with spice mixture.

Place flour in a shallow bowl. Beat egg wash in a deeper dish or bowl. Combine bread crumbs, grated Parmesan and lemon zest in a third bowl placed next to the dish with egg wash.

Dip a fish stick in flour to coat both sides, then shake off excess flour. Dip it in egg wash, followed by the bread crumb and Parmesan mixture. Gently pat the fish with your fingers to help the coating stick. Repeat until all fish sticks have been coated.

Arrange coated fish sticks on a prepared baking sheet. Drizzle the tops with a little oil.

Place the baking sheet on the middle rack of the heated oven. Bake for 12-15 minutes, until they are golden brown.

To serve, give fish sticks a quick squeeze of lemon juice. Serve with ketchup and/or tartar sauce for dipping and additional lemon wedges.

Serves 6.

– Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Skillet lasagna is made on the stovetop instead of in the oven and requires no boiling.

This spicy chicken tortilla soup flavored with chipotles in adobo cooks all day in a slow cooker. Fried tortilla strips add crunch.

Homemade fish sticks are easy to prepare and fresher than frozen.

Photos by Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

John T. Greilick / The Detroit News / TNS

Detroit rapper Lelo stands in front of a work of art at the Detroit Institue of Arts and talks about his unique sonic innovation – what he calls New Detroit," which puts a Gen-Z spin on the existing Detroit hip-hop sound. Photos taken on Aug. 15.

‘New Detroit’ rapper Lelo capitalizes on Gen Z’s *online sensibilities*

By OWEN MCCARTHY
The Detroit News (TNS)

DETROIT — Rapper Lelo stood pondering Diego Rivera’s famed 360-degree mural “Detroit Industry.”

The grandiose painting envelops the Detroit Institute of Arts’ central court, a testament to its enduring stewardship of fine art, its historical weight and the meticulousness of its work. Even in 2025, audiences are impelled to sit with the DIA’s art for some time.

But the folks Lelo’s music most appeals to seek a different experience, and he’s using that to craft a growing niche in the music business. Gen Zers want to scroll, to get information fast, to move on to the next piece – an abrupt turn for a guy who studied oil painting at Albion College. While today’s artistic parameters are worrying at times for Lelo (and annoying at others), he’s opted for pragmatism.

The 25-year-old Detroit native (legally named Khalil Jewell) has managed to capture the fleeting focus of young audiences by releasing a steady, near-weekly stream of sub-2-minute singles. He employs glitchy, distorted sounds that are in vogue as Gen Z’s standards for what’s attention-grabbing continually rise. And he posts constantly on TikTok, though he says he’d rather not.

“I ain’t never want to do that s---,” he said. But it’s a tale as old as Rivera and others at the DIA that creatives seeking success must work with the tools – and the times – at their disposal.

“Who am I, as a person who feel like I struggled, who feel like I went through something, if I wasn’t willing to use the most valuable resource in front of me, which was the TikTok?” Lelo said.

Musicians niftily using the internet is no new feat. Lelo exists in an era, though, where concerns that art is losing its authenticity have accelerated to a fever pitch thanks to the introduction of artificial intelligence into the creative realm.

He also stands out as a TikTok-era success story within Detroit’s storied rap scene – itself on the upswing. As much as his music may be “internet-driven,” its Motor City ingredients are pivotal. He calls the fusion “New Detroit,” which doubles as the title of his debut full-length album, released late last month. Hometown fans are set to have their first chance at hearing it live on Sept. 14 when Lelo headlines The Shelter at the iconic St. Andrews Hall for the first time.

The Detroit sounds of church bells and lasers serving as percussion, smooth bass lines, up-tempo “ghettotech” drum grooves and flows that meander just off the beat’s meter are shot through Lelo’s single-heavy catalog. So, too, are routine references to the city’s culture.

Calling art cutting-edge is often met with skepticism, especially in the competitive, rankings-obsessed world of rap music. But Lelo’s music appears to be captivating audiences, critics and Detroit rap stalwarts alike.

“We are a tough crowd, we do not let s--- slide, we don’t just let everything through,” said Detroit DJ and producer Nick Speed. “But Lelo has created a sound that is very dope.”

An ‘internet-driven sound’

Lelo’s adaptability to audiences in the epoch of scrolling is best exemplified by the mode in which much of his music has rolled out. His debut LP follows years in which the rapper maintained a constant churn of singles, evocative of the assembly line in Rivera’s mural.

Tatiana Cirisano, a music industry analyst at MIDiA Research, said that strategy is a good way to gain traction in the “attention economy” – namely, entertainment companies’ struggle to reel in and maintain audiences given the abundance of content today.

These days, artists fear that leaving two years between album releases will all but assure audiences forget about them, Cirisano said. Lelo’s strategy of “constant releases,” by contrast, helps him stay “front of mind for people.”

But it’s not just the quantity of Lelo’s material that’s aided his ascent (He sits at 1.5 million monthly listeners on Spotify and 65.3K followers on TikTok). There’s also the length of his songs: They rarely eclipse 3 minutes; and several of his most popular don’t even hit the 120-second mark, boosting their replay value.

The conciseness is “intentional” for Lelo, who himself doesn’t always prefer “listening to s--- that’s that long.” What’s more? Short songs ensure he needn’t “force (himself) to say more than what (he) felt was needed to say.”

Cirisano said the brevity is clever: It’s “a bit more aligned with the way people experience music today, which is often in very quick hits.”

Any discussion of Lelo’s internet-age savvy, though, is incomplete without mentioning the music itself. Lelo’s publicist, Isaac Fontes, described it as an “internet-driven sound.”

Take, for example, 2024’s “Encore,” a blistering affair that clocks in at 1:39. At its outset, a haphazard mirage of sound effects – dogs barking, ammunition shells hitting the ground, money-machine beeps, and unintelligible whispers – plays over a busy instrumental. It’s complete with an eerie, high-pitched piano sample on loop, a glitchy hi-hat pattern, and a booming, distorted 808 bass that makes perfectly intact speakers sound on the fritz.

Standing in the Great Hall of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Lelo said with a slight grin that the overblown bass wasn’t an original characteristic of the song: “I knew as soon as I heard the beat it had to be boosted. Ridiculous.” The chaos is somewhat offset by Lelo’s divergently nonchalant flow, which fluctuates between rushing just ahead of the tempo and lagging barely behind.

Social media prowess

Lelo learned early on that social media would be a key ingredient to succeed in music. As he recounted his ascendancy from a “starving artist,” recording himself in college, to years later having label support and enjoying glowing reviews from top music magazines, there was a telling turning point.

“I posted a few videos to TikTok and was really, really consistent about it, and one just blew up one day,” he recalled.

Among Lelo’s earliest videos to crack the algorithm on TikTok was “Stuck Up” in August 2022. It shows him rapping along to the song in a white tiled room. Closed captions of the song – with emojis standing in place for explicit language – flash across the screen. The camera sways back and forth, tracing his subdued movements.

“Shut up n---- and let me think. You can call me Da Vinci or Van Gogh, I don’t know n---- just know I paint,” he lip-syncs, seemingly nodding to his studies at Albion. It’s a low-budget, do-it-yourself video that exemplifies a widely used formula for aspiring musicians in the TikTok era. It has more than 220,000 views on the app, and over 30,000 likes.

His most viral TikTok post used the same strategy. The 2024 video for “No Contempt” captures Lelo in front of a stately stone building on a cloudy night, donning a baggy gray sweater and long rosary, rapping along to the moody music. The clip, which has crossed 1 million views, feels improvised, though Lelo said there’s calculation behind his social media content.

“A lot of that is just studying – I mean, psychology sounds so like a buzzword – but really that’s what it was,” he said. “You feel me, really studying what I feel like could work to get people’s attention, what I felt scenically fit the music.” Perhaps not so coincidentally, the track the video accompanied is Lelo’s most-played on Spotify, with more than 23 million streams.

His “New Detroit” album seems to open with a celebration of his emergence from the sea of hopeful, young creatives yearning for a slice of internet users’ precious attention and into Detroit’s popular music landscape: “I see the lights I must have made it out,” he sings.

‘Indebted’ to Detroit peers

Lelo has charted his own path in the music industry. Still, he said he’s likely enjoyed the coattails, in some sense, of a broader rise in the popularity of Detroit’s rap scene.

He hardly shies away from the association, and the Detroit influences in his music are clear. For one indication, there’s the fact that the only guest rapper on a Lelo song is Detroiter Babyface Ray, featured on the 2025 single “On The Wall.” (The track’s cover shows Lelo wearing his go-to red Detroit Tigers flat-bill).

Speed, the Detroit DJ and producer, pointed to the church bell and laser percussive elements that can be heard across Lelo’s beats, as well as their high tempos, as particularly characteristic of the Motor City.

Michigan State University professor Christina Myers, whose research focuses on the intersection of race and media, said “off-beat cadences” are an essential element of Detroit rap.

“Paris” on his new album is among Lelo’s most overtly Detroit-inspired tracks. The instrumental has been described in several reviews as “ghettotech,” a particularly raw and up-tempo offshoot of Detroit techno.

The rapper’s embrace of his city’s sounds comes as the style seems to be increasingly creeping into the popular consciousness – with help from the web.

In spring 2020, Detroiter 42 Dugg was featured on a major hit of the pandemic era – Atlanta superstar Lil Baby’s “We Paid,” which cracked the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100. Sada Baby’s ghettotech jam “Whole Lotta Choppas” went viral that summer, and was later rereleased with a cameo from Nicki Minaj. The streams for Babyface Ray’s 2023 song “Ron Artest” were bolstered when Flo Milli’s earworm verse over its glossy instrumental gripped TikTok for weeks.

There’s also Gmac Cash’s song “Lions Won Again,” which has spread across Lions Facebook groups and been played atop amateur online edits of the team’s highlights, while becoming a rallying cry among fans.

The swell of Detroit rap is something Lelo’s grateful for: “The exposure of the culture in the last couple of years has made what I do easy. It created a path for me.” While some Detroit artists who’ve recently hit it big may not be his “direct inspirations,” he still feels “indebted to them.”

Cirisano, the music industry analyst, said the growing popularity of regional music scenes like Detroit could be seen as enabled by an internet-caused phenomenon called “hyper-fragmentation.” The vastness of the internet has enabled people to develop increasingly niche tastes and form more “underground cults.” That differs from the MTV days, for example, when audiences all largely saw the same narrow set of stars on their televisions.

At the same time, Cirisano said Gen Z audiences gravitating more to regional sounds could be caused by their desire to “touch grass.”

After coming of age in the pandemic era, passing time in the nebulous, all-encompassing place of the internet, audiences may feel a reactive desire to reconnect with the physical communities close to them.

‘Ever-evolving’

Arguing about the factors that drive artists’ success – and how their predecessors may or may not have influenced them – is a timeless impulse among music fans.

In the online era, anyone with a social media account has a highly visible platform to broadcast their takes. Indeed, comparisons to his peers on Lelo’s TikToks are myriad.

But the rapper doesn’t mind. He’s learned to cast aside opinions from anyone “who hasn’t lived or been a part of” the culture he’s from. But for the most part, he welcomes the associations fans make between him and peers – those from Detroit and beyond: “Everybody is everybody’s inspiration.”

It’s an attitude that’s illustrative of Lelo’s approach – “this huge amalgamation of my own interests, our own lifestyles, experiences that shaped us, and the s--- that’s synonymous with being from Detroit at the same time.”

As he roamed the DIA, Lelo admitted his fears about creativity today: “I’m so caught up and scared of the death of art, but that’s a whole other conversation.” When the museum can feel like an artistic vestige, Lelo’s inventive approach could be a worthwhile way to keep art thriving:

The “New” part of the “New Detroit” slogan means there can’t be a “concrete definition,” he said. “It’s ever-evolving.”

MOVIE REVIEW

Niko Tavernise / Sony Pictures / TNS

Matt Smith, left, and Austin Butler in "Caught Stealing."

Aronofsky swings for fun with *'Caught Stealing'*, and it's an odd fit

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

Watching "Caught Stealing," you can't help but wonder what attracted filmmaker Darren Aronofsky to the project.

Sure, you figure he'd read and enjoyed the novel of the same name by Charlie Huston on which it's based, and, yes, that happened nearly two decades ago, according to the production notes for the movie version sliding into theaters this week.

But this relatively lightweight tale of a former high school baseball phenom-turned-bartender who becomes entangled in the criminal underworld of New York City is so different from his more ambitious works. That this comes from the man who directed 2000's "Requiem for a Dream," 2006's "The Fountain," 2010's "Black Swan" and 2017's underappreciated "Mother!" is tough to believe. If you squint, maybe the more-grounded-in-reality "Caught Stealing" shares some things in common with 2008's "The Wrestler" and 2022's "The Whale," but not much.

The key thing to know is Aronofsky was living in Manhattan's East Village in the late 1990s – the primary setting of the story – when he made his first feature, "Pi" (1998), and calls the New York of that time "peak humanity."

Well, the uneven but ultimately vaguely enjoyable "Caught Stealing" is far from peak Aronofsky, but his adoration of the time, place and source material is evident in the frame.

Austin Butler is our hero, who, following a car accident years ago, still has a beautiful baseball swing but not the knee that would allow him to compete in the majors. He still roots passionately for his hometown San Francisco Giants – his hope was to have been drafted years ago by the team in the middle of the first round of Major League Baseball's draft – although he otherwise has assimilated into late-night New York life.

We meet him near the end of his shift behind the bar of a watering hole around closing time, 4 a.m., when he's paid a visit by Yvonne (Zoë Kravitz), who's running hot after her shift as a paramedic and wants to spend the night at his apartment.

It is there, not long after, that he encounters a couple of Russian mobsters looking for his next-door neighbor and punk-rock enthusiast, Russ (a hilariously mohawked Matt Smith of "House of the Dragon"),

'Caught Stealing'

★★ ½

MPA rating: R (for strong violent content, pervasive language, some sexuality/nudity and brief drug use)

Running time: 1:47

How to watch: In theaters

who's bolted to England, allegedly to see his ill father. Hank's meeting with the goons goes poorly, and wakes in the hospital down a kidney.

That means no more booze for him, Yvonne says – and this is a man who'd enjoyed "the breakfast of champions" upon waking about 1 p.m. after his night with her.

Hank doesn't know what the Russians were hoping to find at Russ', and he tells as much to a police detective, Elise Roman (Regina King), who says she thinks he's hiding something. Not long after this meeting, he is – a key he's found Russ has hidden. And, to add to his issues, Hank also is being hunted by Shmully (Vincent D'Onofrio) and Lipa (Liev Schreiber), a pair of Orthodox Jewish brothers who respect their religious tradition while also being comfortable toting machine guns and killing as needed.

Battered but not broken, Hank stays on the move, desperate to find a way out of this situation with his life – and with the safety of someone who means a great deal to him.

Butler ("Elvis," "The Bikeriders") – giving off young Brad Pitt vibes, as he sometimes does – is reasonably compelling as our flawed but likable protagonist. He's pained when he misses a call back home to Mom, who also lives and dies with the Giants, and he grows more and more desperate to protect Buddy, the cat Russ left with him.

Butler's scenes with Kravitz ("The Batman," "Big Little Lies") have that certain spark, and we wish "Caught Stealing" offered more of them. She brings needed humanity to the affair as Yvonne, who's increasingly desperate for Hank to get his stuff together.

Aside from that, Schreiber, D'Onofrio and Smith are playful in their roles, but they don't really move the needle.

King, meanwhile, who's wildly talented and an Academy Award winner for 2019's "If Beale Street Could Talk," either is going through the motions here or not right for the role of the cop at the middle of the madness. It's borderline shocking that the actor doesn't add more to the proceedings.

Behind the camera, working from Huston's screenplay, Aronofsky brings a few artistic flourishes to "Caught Stealing," such as nifty camera work during a sequence in which Hank maneuvers through fire escapes while trying to avoid the bad guys. And we appreciate the lived-in griminess of the New York City he's given us here. Still, you'd expect something beyond this from him.

It's clear Aronofsky wanted, for once, to make a fun movie, and he says as much in the production notes. And "Caught Stealing," boosted by original songs by English punk rockers Idles, IS fun … but only kinda and, at best, off and on.

It's also largely, although not entirely, predictable.

Ultimately, It's the kind of movie that can wait. Given that offerings from the film's studio, Sony's Columbia Pictures, tend to end up on Netflix sooner than later, the recommendation here is to visit Aronofsky's New York of 1998 from the comfort of your living room down the line.

ALBUM REVIEW

In *'Man's Best Friend,'* Sabrina Carpenter went to pop's pinnacle, and all she got were these lousy guys

By MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Pop superstardom, it turns out, did absolutely nothing to improve Sabrina Carpenter's love life.

That's the thrust of the singer's shrewd and tangy "Man's Best Friend," which dropped last week, just a year after last summer's chart-topping "Short n' Sweet." The earlier album, which spun off a pair of smash singles in "Espresso" and "Please Please Please," went on to be certified triple platinum and to win two Grammy Awards – more than enough to transform Carpenter, now 26, from a former Disney kid into the latest (and horniest) member of pop's A list.

Yet all that success seems only to have attracted more of the losers she sang about last time. Here she's dealing with a smooth talker doling out empty promises, a crybaby who can't decide what he wants, even a guy so fixated on self-betterment that he's lost interest in the bedroom.

"He's busy, he's working, he doesn't have time for me," she trills exasperatedly in "My Man on Willpower," "My slutty pajamas not tempting him in the least."

It's a veritable gallery of rogues,

Marechal Aurore / Abaca via ZUMA Press / TNS

Sabrina Carpenter attending the Dior Homme Menswear Spring/Summer 2026 show as part of Paris Fashion Week in Paris on June 27.

this LP, not least the dude in the dark suit pictured on the cover of "Man's Best Friend" with a hank of Carpenter's blond hair in his fist as she kneels before him. The image inspired an instant controversy when she unveiled it in June, with critics accusing her of propping up dangerous ideas about the submission of women in the age of the tradwife.

Responded the singer in a CBS News interview that aired Friday: "Y'all need to get out more."

Indeed, to take the album artwork at face value is to miss the whole point of Sabrina Carpenter, which is not just lampooning a prudish instinct – of course she's in on the joke – but demonstrating the limits of a dating scene – of an entire social power structure – in which this is what a girl at the top has to work with.

"I like my boys playing hard to get/ And I like my men all incompetent," she sings in the LP's opener and lead single, "Manchild." She swears she's not choosing them – that they keep choosing her. Then she punctuates the claim by batting her fake eyelashes and rhyming "Amen" with a flirty "Hey, men."

As with "Short n' Sweet," Carpenter made "Man's Best Friend" with a tight crew of accomplices – Jack Antonoff, John Ryan and Amy Allen, plus a bunch of tasty studio players – and once again they get a sound that combines the hooky splendor of '70s-era AM-radio pop (think ELO, Wings and especially ABBA) with touches of country and dance music.

"Tears," in which Carpenter lusts after a guy capable of putting together a chair from IKEA, is a pillowy disco thumper with echoes of KC and the Sunshine Band's "That's the Way (I Like It)"; "Nobody's Son" puts starchy palm-court strings over a bouncy reggae groove. Carpenter's singing plays like an actor's sizzle reel, by turns winsome, sneering, bubbly and resigned; in the twangy "Go Go Juice" alone – it's about a woman who's woken up at 10 a.m. and opted to spend the day drunk-dialing exes – she runs through every emotional gradient separating determination from shame.

Song for song – line for line, really – "Man's Best Friend" isn't quite as sharp as "Short n' Sweet," which offered the rare thrill of a young artist coming into her own on her sixth studio album. Occasionally, you can sense Carpenter reaching for a memeable lyric, as in the many gags about wetness in "Tears"; "When Did You Get Hot?," meanwhile, feels like something Ariana Grande abandoned after workshopping for a minute.

When she's on, though, she's on: "Goodbye" is a dazzling orchestral-pop number in which she gives the boot to a hot-and-cold lover – "Arrivederci, au revoir/ Forgive my French, but f--- you, ta-ta" – and "House Tour" a winking sex romp whose thwacking drums and rubbery funk bass call to mind Paula Abdul's "Opposites Attract." (After Doja Cat's Antonoff-produced "Jealous Type," might this signal a coming Abdul-aissance?)

Near the end of the album, Carpenter dials down the comedy for "Don't Worry I'll Make You Worry," a sad and shimmery ballad about the thin line between love and war. "Silent treatment and humbling your ass/ Well, that's some of my best work," she sings over strummed acoustic guitar before promising oh so sweetly to "leave you feeling like a shell of a man."

If you can't join 'em, beat 'em.

SERIES REVIEW

‘The Runarounds,’ set to the soundtrack of a real band, is teen wish fulfillment

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Jackson Lee Davis / Prime Video / TN

TOP: William Lipton leads the band on Prime Video’s YA series “The Runarounds.” **ABOVE:** From left, Charlie (William Lipton), Wyatt (Jesse Golliher) and Bez (Zendé Murdock) are featured in a scene from “The Runarounds,” which is set in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Hey, hey, they’re the Runarounds, the latest Pinocchio band to straddle the line between fiction and fact. Meet Charlie (William Lipton), guitar! He’s a romantic! Neil (Axel Ellis), also guitar! Not just a pothead! (He reads Ferlinghetti.) Topher (Jeremy Yun), lead guitar! The quiet one! Wyatt (Jesse Golliher), bass! The even quieter one! And Bez (Zendé Murdock), drums, replacing Pete (Maximo Salas), henceforth the “manager,” who surely has been named for Pete Best, or I will eat my Beatles fan club card.

They have been assembled for your fist-pumping adulation from a reported 5,000-plus hopefuls responding to an open call for musicians and dropped into the center of a teenage musical soap opera, also called “The Runarounds,” premiering this week on Prime Video.

This rockin’ concoction comes to you courtesy of Jonas Pate, creator of the Netflix teenage treasure-hunt series ”Outer Banks,” and like that show, it is a wish-fulfilling fantasy set in Pate’s native North Carolina, specifically the seaside city of Wilmington, which offers a lot of lovely scenery and adorable domestic architecture. And like that show, it is all about being young and wanting to be free, like the bluebirds. Unlike that show, everybody here keeps their shirts on, in the actual sense (though not at all in the metaphorical).

The eight-episode season begins just as high school is ending, which in dramatic terms means parties and a scene in which someone makes a graduation speech. (That will be Sophia, played by Lilah Pate, daughter of Jonas.) Charlie, who has just turned 18, is avoiding telling his parents that he’s not going to go to college, even though he’s been accepted to one. (To just one is the perhaps unintended implication.) His entire future, in his head at least, depends on “getting signed” by the summer’s end – which, in music business terms, is 20th-century thinking, but like a lot of music being made today, this is an old-fashioned show. That, and getting Sophia, the beautiful, overachieving sad girl he’s been crushing on for four years, to notice him.

Charlie, Toph, Neil and Pete have been playing unspecified gigs under an unfortunate name I’ll not repeat, and they feel pretty good about the band, although strangely it takes until the pilot for them to realize that Pete is a terrible drummer. After some group soul-searching and flyer-posting, they pick up Bez, who drums so well one wonders why he isn’t in three other bands already – or why there seems to be no other groups around, or any sort of music scene. He brings along his friend Wyatt, who picks up a bass, and a new band is born. Wyatt’s interiority, shy smile and young Jeff Tweedy vibe makes him immediately the most intriguing Runaround.

Along with Sophia, who writes poems that might be lyrics, the female element is filled out by Amanda (Kelley Pereira), Topher’s controlling, capable girlfriend, who will prove a secret weapon for the band, and Bender (Marley Aliah), who goes about with cameras, likes Neil and wholly embodies a somewhat scary, casually cool, not-at-all pixieish dream girl. They don’t get to be in the band, but as actors, they do a lot to support their nonprofessional castmates. (Lipton, the only professional actor in the band – including in 328 episodes of “General Hospital” – comes across as less authentic than the untrained others, though that may be in part because he’s saddled with the heaviest storylines and has to say things like, “I want to write love songs that change the world.”)

As in “Outer Banks,” and two out of every three teen shows ever, most are at odds with their parents, catnip to young viewers who are even occasionally at odds with their own parents, over even minor things because – parents! Charlie’s are played by Brooklyn Decker, whose character teaches film, and Hayes MacArthur, whose character has spent 12 years working on a novel – that is, only working on a novel, which is to say not working; somehow they are not divorced. (And money is becoming an issue, and there is a Big Secret that will shake the family.) “What kind of work is done in a bathrobe, father?” says Charlie’s mouthy little sister, Tatum (Willa Dunn).

Neil’s father, who has health problems, assumes his son will join him in his painting business; Topher’s are conservative stuck-up pills who, like Amanda, have him slated for a career in finance. Bez’s father is also a musician but thinks his son is wasting his time with the Runarounds. Wyatt’s mother is some sort of addict, who hates him. Sophia’s father is self-medicating after the death of her mother some years before, leaving her to pick up the pieces. (“I’m doing everything right on paper but I don’t feel alive,” she says.) Wouldn’t you rather be with your friends, playing in a band?

Wyatt will find a job and a refuge, and the band a rehearsal space in a music store run by nonparental adult Catesby (Mark Wystrach), who spent 18 years in Nashville experiencing success and failure and knew Charlie’s mother once upon a time – so that’ll be a thing. (The store apparently does no business at all.) For inspiration he sends the kids way out in the country to a secret show by his old friend Dexter Romweber (a real person, now deceased, played by Brad Carter), who will shake their nerves and rattle their brains and leave them with words of encouraging and discouraging wisdom before disappearing into the night and a fictionalized fate.

‘The Runarounds’

Rating: 16+
How to watch: Prime Video

Every so often, we get a performance – at a graduation party, a county fair, a wedding, a roadhouse, a prestigious opening slot, where the crowds react as if they’re extras in a TV show. (The kids can play, and the songs aren’t bad.) As they struggle toward their goal, they’ll meet disaster and resistance. They’ll fuss, they’ll feud. They’ll make mistakes, they’ll make sacrifices, they’ll make trouble, though no trouble that can’t be fixed with an apology or checkbook or someone to bail them out. (I am pretty sure in the long history of underage kids sneaking into clubs, none has ever been arrested and put in jail, but maybe things are different in Wilmington.) They’ll get high and stay out all night, talking heart to heart, which does seem authentically teenage. (The “Wizard of Oz” costumes less so.)

There are niche references for the pop-musically informed: Catesby telling Wyatt to put a couple of P13 pickups into a ’68 Silvertone guitar; moving from the two to the five chord; name-dropping storied rock clubs (the 40 Watt, the 9:30). “This isn’t some f------ Squier I got for Christmas,” Neil wails when his Gretsch White Falcon disappears. When Charlie rides his bike off a roof into a swimming pool in the midst of Pete’s party, that is almost certainly in homage to the ”I am a golden god” scene from ”Almost Famous”; later, they’ll nick an idea from the Beatles.

As with other manufactured bands before them, the line between what’s real and what’s retail is blurred. You can buy Runarounds-branded merch (T-shirts and hoodies, a beach towel, a sweatband, lighters). You can stream their “album,” co-produced by the Talking Heads’ Jerry Harrison, and released by actual major label Arista, from all the usual musical platforms. They’ve got dates scheduled from mid-September to late October in the South, mid-Atlantic and Northeast in legit rock halls, though whether they will identify themselves by their character names, I don’t know. (That wasn’t a problem for the Monkees, who just used their own.) I doubt they’ll be sleeping on floors or tripled up at a Motel 6, unless things are worse than I know at Amazon. If they split the driving, I hope they’re more responsible with that than the characters they play.

It’s a fluffy show, sometimes catching something real, frequently improbable, never completely ridiculous. But the audience at which it’s aimed may be happy enough with an aspirational fairy tale that reflects their own feelings about their own feelings, for which the music itself is a megaphone and a metaphor.

“All good pop songs are a little corny,” says Charlie.

“Maybe,” replies Sophia, which is the right answer.

BOOKS

The easiest way to restore your attention span could be just outside your door

By JACLYN COSGROVE
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Walking in nature for as little as 15 to 20 minutes can improve your attention span – even if you don't always enjoy it.

In his new 324-page book, "Nature and the Mind: The Science of How Nature Improves Cognitive, Physical, and Social Well-Being" (Simon & Schuster), environmental neuroscientist Marc G. Berman lays out how our natural environment can help restore people's frazzled, overstimulated nervous systems.

Berman, founder and director of the Environmental Neuroscience Laboratory at the University of Chicago, is also professor and chair of the department of psychology at the University of Chicago as well as co-director of the Masters of Computational Social Science program.

Through his lab's research, Berman and his team have found that walking for longer periods of time – say about 50 minutes – can substantially boost cognitive function, but the beauty is you can still glean a noticeable cognitive benefit from spending just 15 to 20 minutes in nature.

In one study, Berman and his team asked people to walk at different times of the year: in June when it was pleasant in Michigan and in January when it was 25 degrees and the trees were bare. As you might have guessed, the summer group was blissfully happy, and the winter group did not enjoy their stroll.

"But they still showed the same cognitive benefit as the people that walked in June," he said of the latter group. "For these cognitive benefits, it's not about liking the interaction. It's something deeper. It's how we process natural stimulation."

The Times spoke to Berman about what he and others have discovered through studying how our natural environments affect the human psyche and how we could design more elements of nature into our cities to improve our overall well-being.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

What is environmental neuroscience? Where did that term come from?

It's built off some earlier research where people did studies on rodents and found out that when rodents lived in rich environments that had toys and there were other rodents around, these rats had more synapses in their brain, more glia cells. The physical environment that these rodents were [living] in was impacting their brains. And I was really taken by that.

[Then] I took this course with professor Steve Kaplan, and he was talking about this theory called attention restoration theory and how people could restore their attention by interacting with natural environments. Steve, an advisor and I designed studies to test attention restoration theory, and I saw in the field there wasn't really a place necessarily for this kind of research.

All these studies on rodents were done years ago, and nothing was really tying it together. I saw all these different connections, and I thought, maybe I could help to define this new field of environmental neuroscience where we'd actually really see how the physical environment that surrounds us actually affects brain functioning and to try to combine cutting-edge techniques in cognitive neuroscience with ideas from environmental psychology.

Can you talk about these terms you use in the book: "involuntary attention" and "soft fascination"? It seems like what you're saying is, when we are in nature, it has a way of recharging us because of the way we're dispensing our brain space or energy.

[Let's] start with attention restoration theory. One of the key tenets that was posited by Steve Kaplan and his wife, Rachel Kaplan, is that humans have two kinds of attention. One kind of attention is called directed attention. Sometimes that's called endogenous or top-down attention. That's the kind of attention where you as the individual person are deciding what to pay attention to. So presumably you're deciding to pay attention to me and what I'm saying, even if it might not be the most interesting thing that you could find in the environment.

I do find what you're saying interesting, just to be clear.

[Laughs] Humans are really good at directing their attention, but we can only direct our attention for so long before we become mentally fatigued, and it's hard to focus. We've all had that sensation at the end of a long workday where you might be just staring at the computer screen and, you know, nothing's happening.

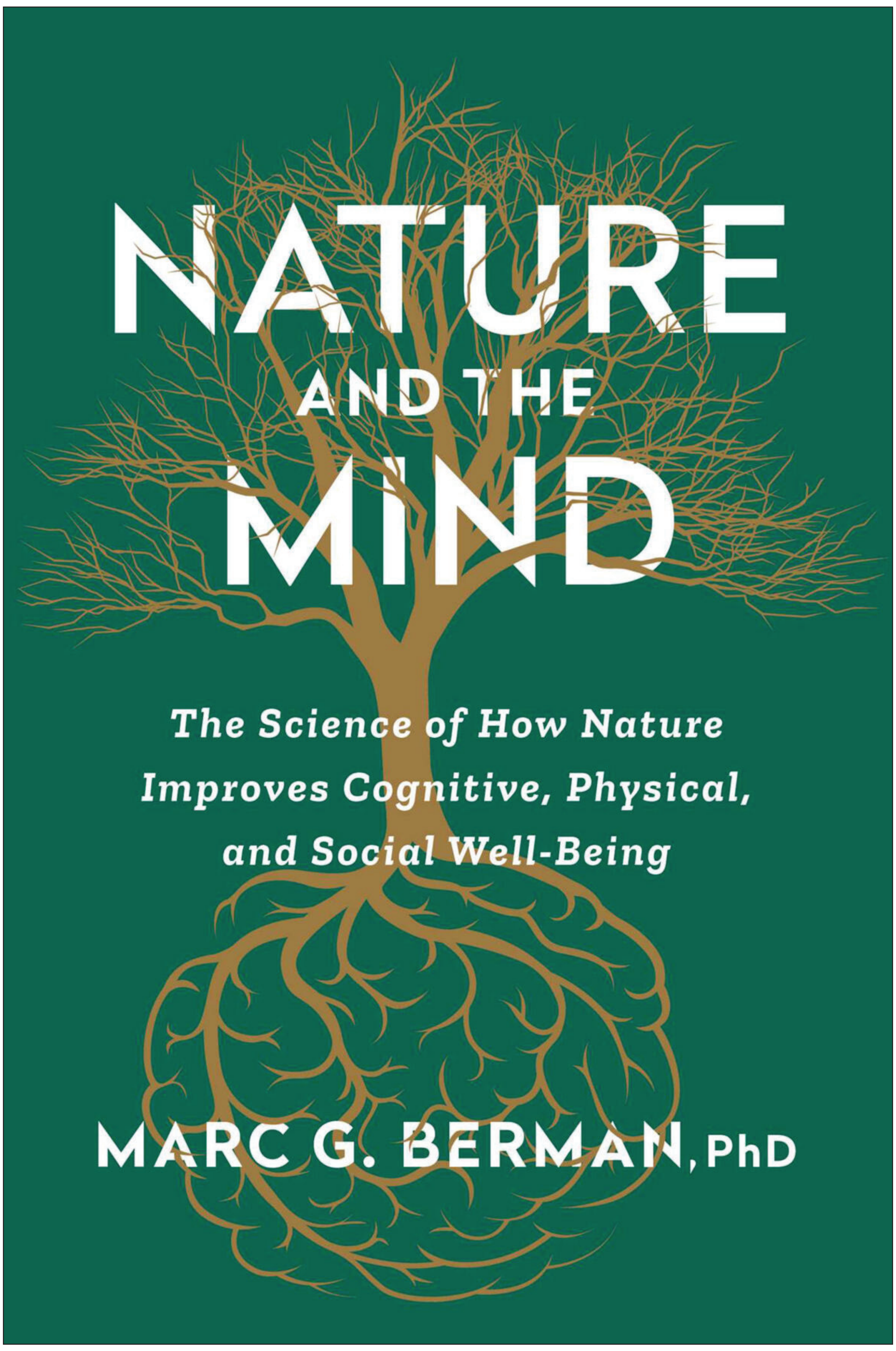
When you can't focus anymore, like that, we say that you're in a directed attention fatigue state. You've exhausted this directed attention resource.

That's different from involuntary attention, which is when our attention is automatically captured by interesting stimulation in the environment. Bright lights, loud noises, those kinds of stimulation automatically capture our attention, and we don't really have any control over it.

Like the loud buzz of a motorcycle.

Yes, and it's thought that that kind of attention is less susceptible to fatigue or depletion. So, you don't often hear people say, 'Oh, I can't look at that beautiful waterfall anymore. It's just too interesting to look at. I'm too tired.' One of the ideas with attention restoration theory is that if you can find environments that don't place a lot of demands on your directed attention while simultaneously having interesting stimulation that activates the involuntary attention, you could restore or replenish [your] directed attention.

See NATURE, page X27



S&S / Simon Element / TNS

Walking in nature for as little as 15 to 20 minutes can improve your attention span – even if you don't always enjoy it.

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Aug. 23, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. "Quicksilver (Deluxe Limited Edition)" by Callie Hart (Forever)
2. "On Wings of Blood (Deluxe Limited Edition)" by Briar Boleyn (Mira)
3. "The End of the World As We Know It: New Tales of Stephen King's The Stand" edited by Christopher Golden and Brian Keene (Gallery)
4. "People We Meet on Vacation: Deluxe Edition" by Emily Henry (Berkley)
5. "Quicksilver" by Callie Hart (Forever)
6. "Atmosphere: A Love Story" by Taylor Jenkins Reid (Ballantine)
7. "My Friends: A Novel" by Fredrik Backman (Atria)
8. "The Dragon Wakes with Thunder" by K.X. Song (Ace)
9. "Onyx Storm" by Rebecca Yarros (Red Tower)
10. "For Richer For Poorer: A Novel" by Danielle Steel (Delacorte)

Hardcover nonfiction

1. "The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can't Stop Talking About" by Mel Robbins (Hay House)
2. "Don't Believe Everything You Think: Why Your Thinking Is the Beginning & End of Suffering (Expanded Edition)" by Joseph Nguyen (Authors Equity)
3. "Mistakes that Made Me a Millionaire: How to Transform Setbacks into Extraordinary Success" by Kim Perell (BenBella/Holt)
4. "On Power" by Mark R. Levin (Threshold)
5. "Tame Your Thoughts: Three Tools to Renew Your Mind and Transform Your Life" by Max Lucado (Thomas Nelson)
6. "The Idaho Four: An American Tragedy" by James Patterson and Vicky Ward (Little, Brown)
7. "The Opposite of Settling: How to Get Everything You Want Out of Love and Life Without Losing Your Spark" by Case Kenny (Hay House)
8. "The Last Book Written by a Human: Becoming Wise in the Age of AI" by Jeff Burningham (Forefront)
9. "Everything Is Tuberculosis: The History and Persistence of Our Deadliest Infection" by John Green (Crash Course)
10. "The Next Conversation: Argue Less, Talk More" by Jefferson Fisher (Tarcher)

– Reprinted from Publishers Weekly

REVIEW

A devout woman longs for another life in 'wonderful' 'Ruth'

By LAURIE HERTZEL
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

In structure, tone and theme, "Ruth" owes a debt to Evan S. Connell's wonderful 1959 novel, "Mrs. Bridge" – a debt author Kate Riley freely acknowledges.

Like "Mrs. Bridge," "Ruth" is written in close third person and structured in short, flat chunks of anecdote and description. The story follows a slightly baffled but obedient woman trying to fit into a life of conformity.

Born into a fictitious, strict Anabaptist commune in 1963, Ruth is, like all women in the religious colony, destined to become a passive and obedient wife. Any imagination or nonconformity is tamped down. Vanity is squashed, as are most emotions. Women wear kerchiefs over their heads and dress in long, homemade skirts provided by the collective. ("Fabrics were assigned and sometimes punitive.") Mirrors large enough to show the entire face are not permitted.

Ruth is a believer, and she does her best but she cannot obliterate her thoughts, which are sometimes wickedly funny and at other times seething and rebellious.

Her beauty-loving mother, Esther, had hoped to name her Maybelline Raisinette, and Ruth later in life hoped to name her own daughter Idea. But bestowing names – as with so many other responsibilities – is a job for the men. Maybelline Raisinette became Ruth, "the ugliest Biblical name [Esther] knew," reminding her of "nothing so much as a tuber," and Idea became Gretel.

Women's desires are not acknowledged, much less indulged, and when Ruth brings a school friend for communal dinner, the friend whispers, "You've got to get out of here. You can stay with my family as long as you need."

But like Mrs. Bridge, Ruth clings to her cage and quietly fears what lies beyond.

Much of the book's quirky humor comes from Riley's deadpan tone and her juxtaposition of odd details – Ruth's brother painted a portrait of the Virgin Mary that is "careful and menacing." The women in an old photograph look "like rats in kerchiefs."

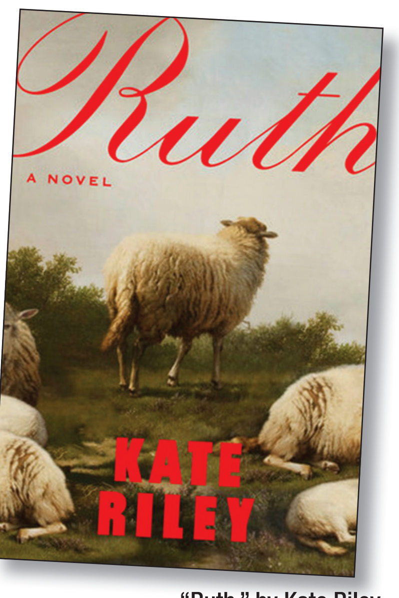
Riley's descriptions of people are devastating. Dick McLeod was "a zealous toad of a man." Seven-year-old Robert Mueller studied Ruth's friend "with the intensity of a predator." At a Mother's Day outing, where "all qualifying sisters" were bused to a lake, one of them hoisted up her skirt "and rushed into the water like a stung hen." I chuckled throughout this novel, even as I despaired that Ruth would ever be free.

She has no say in her life, and she is left to watch in lovelorn sorrow when the boy she fancies is paired with another woman. Ruth understands who her husband will be when another youth, Alan ("purely medium in all qualities"), speaks to her when they are both looking at a bulletin board.

She is cautiously curious about the outside world. "She never lingered online, though she desperately wanted a few hours, unseen by God and Alan, to search."

"Ruth" grapples with free will and with valuing the collective over the individual. No one in the commune goes hungry, everyone is safe, babies are watched, clothing, food and necessities are provided. All questions are answered through faith. But is all that enough? "Ruth" raises questions the reader must ponder as it shows again and again that you can control a person's behavior but you cannot control their inner life.

What a strange and wonderful book this is – emphasis on the strange. No, wait – emphasis on the wonderful.



"Ruth," by Kate Riley.

Riverhead Books / TNS

REVIEW

Meet the man who tried to establish a Black state within the U.S.

By HAMILTON CAIN
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

As Americans quarrel in public squares, real and online, writers are looking back at our history to make sense of it all. Caleb Gayle rises to the challenge in his eloquent, if discursive, "Black Moses," chronicling activist Edward McCabe's struggles against post-Civil War racism.

Raised free in the Northeast, McCabe (1850-1920) came of age in the flux of Reconstruction – whip-smart, a "problem solver and a doer" whose politesse and organizational skills masked a burning ambition. Our knowledge of his youth is sparse, but his adult résumé was atypical: While clerking on Wall Street and in Chicago he absorbed the protocols of capitalism and networking, which he applied to a vision of Black liberation.

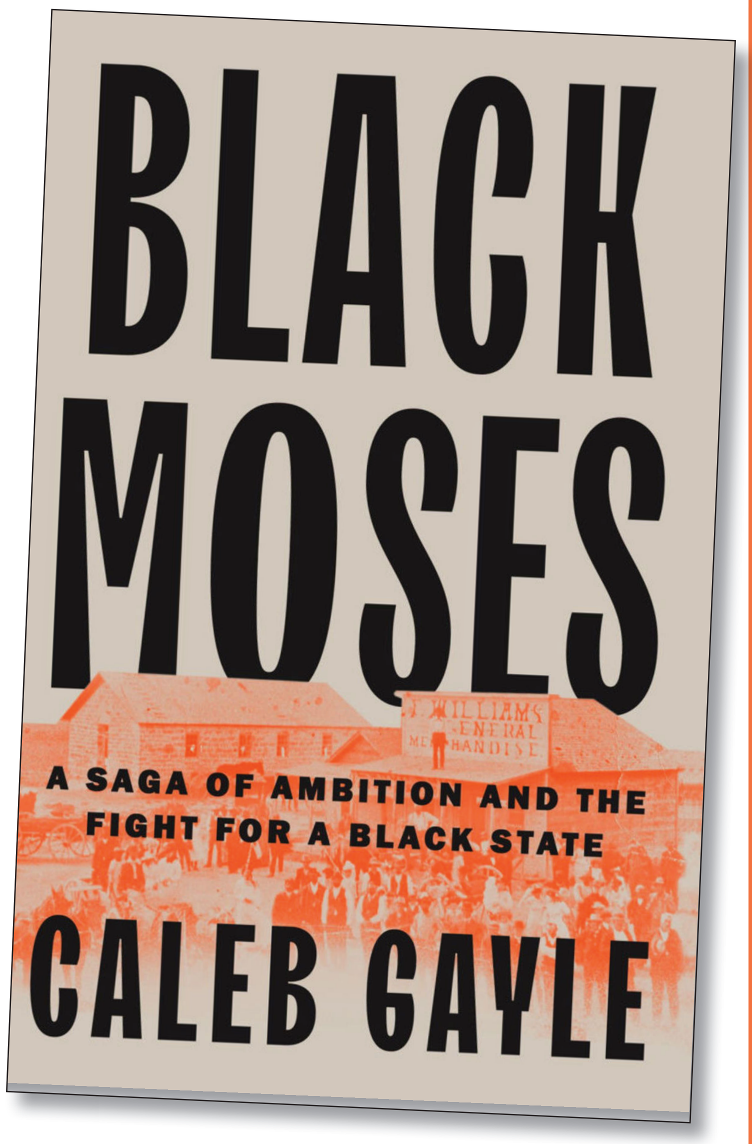
McCabe and a friend, Abram T. Hall, Jr., focused on Oklahoma, then called Indian Territory. McCabe first traveled to Kansas, a base where he evolved his concept for a Black-only state. He married Sarah Bryant in 1881 and grew his role as a grassroots Republican politician. His mission: to help the formerly enslaved, known as "Exodusters," out of the South.

"Salvation was collective, because it was for a coherent group: Black people in the South. It was terrestrial because they planned to find salvation in the real land of Kansas," the author notes. "As Reconstruction collapsed, Black people had to act – and quickly."

Gayle's narrative braids his vigorous research with the work of scholars such as historian Nell Irvin Painter, skipping around as he fleshes out the context informing McCabe's story: rampant violence surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act (to determine if there would be slavery in those states), Lincoln's notion of repatriating freed slaves to Liberia and McCabe's maneuvers among late 19th-century politicos like President Benjamin Harrison. This structure opens space to consider the confluence of events and ideology that inspire Gayle's arc.

"No longer would McCabe prize equality but rather a nationalism, a supremacy of his race over matters in the state he hoped to make theirs," he observes. McCabe was determined to "build another 'Hayti.'"

McCabe joined forces with newspaperman William Eagleson to lobby Harrison for Oklahoma's admission to the Union as a Black state. Gayle depicts this Washington interlude as grand theater, tinged with strife. McCabe "went about soliciting investments and donations (called subscribing) from elite Blacks and sympathetic white political power brokers to finance the operation." Gayle, too, exposes McCabe's colonist motivations in the service of a brutalized minority, seeking Native property.



"Black Moses," by Caleb Gayle.
Penguin Publishing Group / TNS

Gayle's narrative braids his vigorous research with the work of scholars such as historian Nell Irvin Painter, skipping around as he fleshes out the context informing McCabe's story: rampant violence surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act (to determine if there would be slavery in those states), Lincoln's notion of repatriating freed slaves to Liberia and McCabe's maneuvers among late 19th-century politicos like President Benjamin Harrison. This structure opens space to consider the confluence of events and ideology that inspire Gayle's arc.

He had manage to establish three towns before the notorious land run of 1891, when settlers swept across the plains at the behest of Harrison and others within the GOP. McCabe's "hope in the Republican Party was evaporating. His frustration over the misalignment between his desired pace of progress and that of his white Republican colleagues had been simmering in the background."

McCabe's final decades were marked by one last impassioned speech amid waning influence and the dwindling of Black fortunes, culminating with the horrific Tulsa massacres in 1921, the year after McCabe died penniless. Gayle punctuates stunning descriptions and analysis with single-sentence barbs: "He had become nobody once again."

Gayle does more than just rescue a forgotten yet crucial figure; he places McCabe at the center of radical liberation, much as Aaron Robertson does with the 20th-century pastor, Albert Cleage, Jr., in " The Black Utopians." As our nation continues to fracture into partisan camps, Gayle tells an engrossing tale, revealing that the tensions remain the same.

REVIEW

New stories put characters at the corner of 'huh?' and 'yikes'

By MAY-LEE CHAI
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Elaine Hsieh Chou's clever and beguiling short story collection "Where Are You Really From" explores issues of identity and belonging with a speculative twist.

In six stories and one novella, Chou takes on Western-centered notions of beauty, mail-order brides, massage parlors, generational trauma and artistic license. She flips stereotypes on their ears, turning her stories into funhouse mirrors that challenge her protagonists – and readers – to navigate worlds that are both strange and all too familiar.

For example, in "Mail Order Love(®)," women from Taiwan literally are shipped to the U.S. in cardboard boxes, after Congress bans all immigration, exploiting a loophole in which mail-order brides are "considered imported foreign goods." Chou details how one bride, Bunny, adapts to life in America, getting her GED, heading out with friends, and generally ignoring her decades-older new husband, Frank.

"The rare moments she was at home, Bunny spent all her time in the living room watching Korean soap operas dubbed in Mandarin and smoking menthol cigarettes" as Frank turns to customer service chatbots, trying to figure out his purchase.

In "Carrot Legs" Chou examines the pressure to conform to impossible beauty standards. A 13-year-old girl visits her cousin in Taipei, where a photo booth's app shows her an idealized portrait: "my skin was fairer and clearer, my eyes, larger and brighter. How awful and wonderful, I thought, to witness my idealized form when I had lived in ignorance of it."

Realizing that "In America, I was not beautiful, but in Taiwan, I was ugly," the teenager becomes increasingly obsessed with a noodle shop owner who happens to be naturally beautiful, thinking of increasingly unhinged ways she might possess the woman's beauty as her own.

All the stories showcase Chou's audacious talent for wordplay alongside her deep empathy. Chou's debut novel, "Disorientation" (there's that wordplay), was a New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award and Thurber Prize finalist.

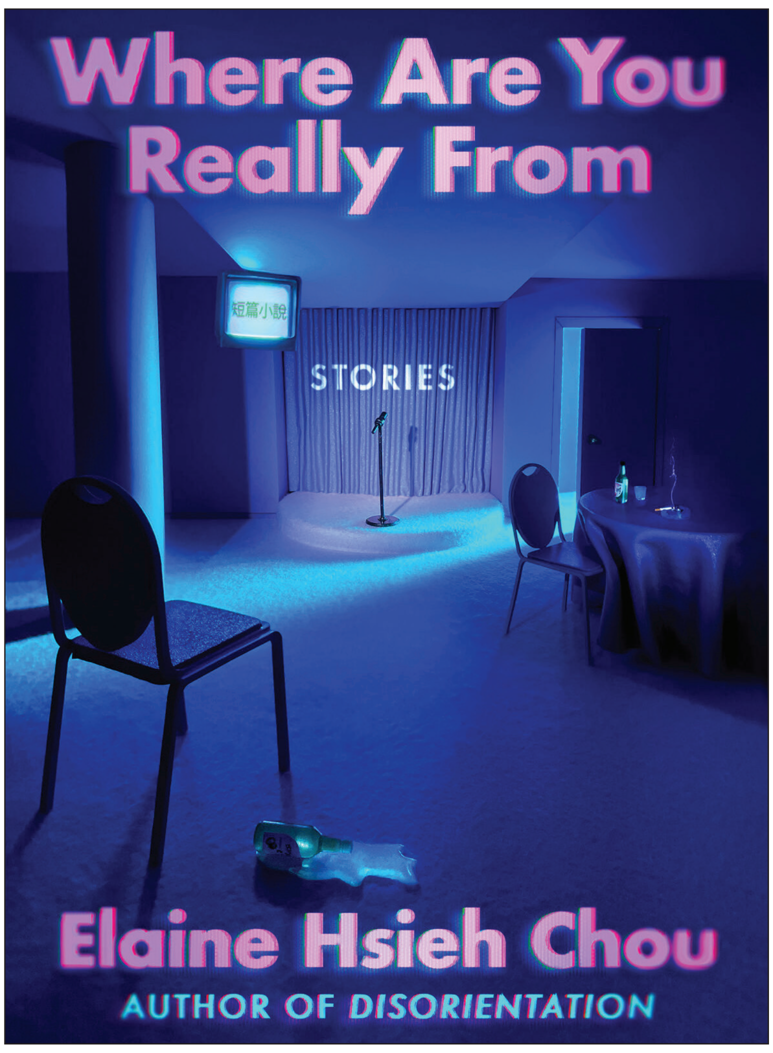
While humorously unpacking stereotypes about identity, Chou never condescends to her characters. The stories can become surprisingly tender or melancholic and wistful or even furious.

For example, in "Happy Endings," a man goes to Hong Kong for its advanced virtual reality brothels, only to encounter an AI entity with terrifying intelligence, and a desire for vengeance.

In "You Put a Rabbit on Me," a young American woman, Elaine A, goes to Paris as an au pair in the hopes of finding herself, and literally does, encountering her doppelganger, Elaine B, who resembles her in every way except she is French.

Her fascination soon turns to jealousy: "Unlike my anger, which manifested in geriatric bags under my eyes and teenage acne breakouts, Elaine B wore her anger like a fur coat, timeless and luxurious. It was so unfair."

While Chou's protagonists fret and plot, readers will delight in these thoughtful, provocative and often very, very funny stories.



Penguin / TNS

"Where Are You Really From," by Elaine Hsieh Chou.

NATURE

From page X26

OK, what would be an example of that?

We say that the kind of stimulation that activates involuntary attention has to be what we call "softly fascinating."

When you look at that waterfall, it doesn't capture all of your attentional resources. You can still mind-wander and think about other things while you're looking at the waterfall. If you're in Times Square, it's also super interesting. It captures a lot of your attentional focus, but it does so in an all-consuming way.

The kind of stimulation that gives you this restful, restorative experience has to be softly fascinating and not harshly fascinating.

In the book, you write quite a bit about the curving design of nature and its benefits. For the cynics among us, I wanted to ask: Can we just design more nature around us and more of its elements into buildings and benefit without actually being in nature – without taking a walk in the park or in the woods? Is it just curves that we need?

We can get some of the benefits that way. Antoni Gaudí and other architects knew that in how they designed buildings, and people really like those kinds of buildings that have biophilic design, where they mimic the patterns of nature in design. I don't view that as a replacement for nature. That's sort of like a supplement.

We find that in a lot of our studies, going into actual nature gives you the biggest bang for your buck, because being in nature, you get all the modalities: the visual, the auditory, the tactile, even the olfactory, the smell. You're getting that whole kind of experience that I think you just can't really mimic in a built space.

I wouldn't want to say, "Oh, the takeaway is, if we found all the nature ingredients, we can destroy all the nature and then just build it." No, we have to preserve all the nature, because we can't engineer anything as good as nature.

You write about the benefits of experiencing nature when one is depressed, anxious or grieving. What is it about nature that helps the anxious or depressed mind? Is it that we are finally putting our phones away?

We've done studies with people who have been diagnosed with clinical depression and we weren't actually sure if the nature walk would be as beneficial to them.

We thought, "Well, if nature increases attention and cognitive abilities and if somebody is suffering from depression and they're ruminating about negative thoughts and feelings, maybe a walk alone in nature might actually increase depression and increase depressive rumination."

We did the same walking study [with] a nonclinical sample. But with these participants with clinical depression, we actually induced them to ruminate about negative thoughts and feelings before they went on the walk. And we found that the walk in nature was actually more beneficial to participants suffering from clinical depression than it was for our nonclinical samples.

We think that's because when you are in a depressive state and you're ruminating about negative thoughts and feelings, that's actually robbing a lot of your attentional focus and your directed attention. So nature is boosting them up, and we think that is giving them the cognitive resources to then deal with their depression and their rumination.

In the book, you talk about how nature can make us see each other again as people. How do we, and especially parents worried about their kids growing up in this sort of dehumanizing culture that we're in, tap into that benefit?

There was a study done by some researchers from China where they found that being in nature, you're not so egocentric. You feel like you're part of something larger. And then that actually increases feeling of humanization of others. Even though there may not be people out there, you start feeling more connected to everybody, in part probably because you're feeling more connected to nature.

And they found this could even happen with indoor plants, which they found increased feelings of humanization of others and self-transcendence. And it wasn't just driven by nature making people feel good. It was about nature increasing these feelings of self-transcendence, and then that increased feelings of humanization.

You and I have both said "in nature" multiple times. How do you define "in nature"? Like, what's the baseline for when our brain says, "I am in nature"?

It's a hard thing to define. It probably differs for different people, like your dad's definition of nature [in Oklahoma] might differ from somebody living in New York or Los Angeles.

What does one person conceive as natural that another does not? What does appear to be very consistent across cultures is this nature preference – that people do prefer things that look more natural to things that look more built.

How important is it, in terms of benefits of being in nature, that nature inspires awe? A walk in nature through a park that your average person would perceive as boring – does that benefit them?

You don't have to be going to the most awe-inspiring beautiful nature to get these cognitive benefits. But if the nature is so boring, like, I don't think you would get a benefit like walking through a cornfield per se. And we've actually asked people, "Do you like the cornfield more or walking through a tree-lined urban street?" And people like the tree-lined urban street better than the cornfield. You might argue maybe the cornfield is actually less natural than the tree-lined street because it's been so influenced by humans. But it's just to say that not all nature is created equal, and not all urban is created equal.

AUTOMOTIVE

Photos by Land Rover / TNS

The 2025 Land Rover Defender 110.

2025 Land Rover Defender is a posh ark for a crumbling nation

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Ready for a reality check? The American Society of Civil Engineers has graded the state of American road infrastructure a solid D, which is barely a grade at all. It's a participation trophy for asphalt. We are, officially, failing at pavement, but you knew this already. You've no doubt had the pleasure of inching across a cratered freeway in your car, feeling the suspension crash in sympathy, and wondered whether the next pothole would be the one that rearranges your spine. Once upon a Reagan administration, we had a C, which is to say we were mediocre. Now, mediocrity looks like the good old days.

This might lead you to ponder the proper chariot in which to traverse our crumbling republic. That's easy: the 2025 Land Rover Defender 110. After all, decline is a heritage industry for the British, as they have long built vehicles to ride out the end of empire with dignity, tweed and a good deal of leather. The 2025 Land Rover Defender is pure serenity in an age of decay. After all, Rome fell, Constantinople fell, Detroit fell, and yet someone, somewhere was driving home in something comfortable.

The Defender is here to make your corner of America tolerable. When the water main erupts like Vesuvius, the Defender can ford nearly 3 feet of water. When your local freeway collapses, the Defender's approach, breakover and departure angles will step politely over the wreckage. Land Rover even offers all-terrain progress control, which is the genteel way of saying that the car will crawl over disaster at a steady, unruffled pace while you adjust your cuff links. It doesn't matter whether it's mud, sand, snow or simple government incompetence.

Of course, such feats are hardly news. This is a Land Rover, and Land Rovers do not apologize for being brilliant off-road. What's interesting is that the Defender has slipped into something far more modern. Gone is its boxy predecessor that looked as if it was assembled by a hungover man with a socket wrench and a grudge. In its place? A lithe, chic, urbane SUV that looks like it was designed by Apple after a three-martini lunch. And that's appropriate, given its clientele. You're more likely seeing a 2025 Defender transporting an orthodontist and his labradoodle to his ski chalet in Aspen than shuttling wildlife biologists studying leopards in Africa.

Offered as the two-door 90, four-door 110 and extended-length 130, power comes from a 296-horsepower 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine, a 395-horsepower supercharged and turbocharged 3.0-liter inline-six mild hybrid system, a 518-horsepower supercharged V-8 or a 626-horsepower twin-turbocharged V-8. As you might expect, all come with standard four-wheel drive, locking differentials and an eight-speed automatic transmission. Now built on a unibody platform with four-wheel independent suspension, the Defender remains stout and purposeful, as if the car itself were whispering: "Go on, drive over that mountain and see what happens." Yet it remains comfortable and effortlessly controllable, unlike, say, your labradoodle.

Inside, the Defender is less expedition and more lounge. Instead of square edges and tractor parts, we now have rounded corners, a 11.4-inch infotainment touchscreen, a digital gauge cluster, head-up display, wireless charging, leather, seats that heat and cool, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, onboard Wi-Fi hotspot are standard and an optional 10- or 14-speaker Meridian stereo system. Still, a magnesium beam runs the length of the instrument panel while rivets punctuate the door trim to take your mind off the cabin's plushness. It's not unlike a pair of diamond-encrusted hiking boots.

The 2025 Land Rover Defender is a car for end times and good times. You will not notice the potholes. You will not mind the traffic. You will, in fact, feel faintly superior to the entire sorry mess, because your seat is ventilated, your Wi-Fi is strong, and your suspension has more travel than you do. This is the genius of the Defender: It does not solve problems. It renders them irrelevant.

And when the great bridges tumble and the airports become ruins, when the nation itself wheezes into its dotage, there will still be a certain pleasure in motoring home in a Land Rover Defender.

Just don't drive it across the golf course. It's the last piece of infrastructure America still maintains.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida. Readers may send him email at TheDrivingPrintz@gmail.com.

The 2025 Land Rover Defender 110's leather seats heat and cool.

2025 Land Rover Defender 110

Base price: $60,800
Engine: Supercharged, turbocharged 3.0-liter inline-6 mild hybrid
Horsepower/Torque: 395/406 pound-feet
EPA rating (combined city/highway): 17 mpg
Fuel required: Premium
Length/Width/Height: 212/79/78 inches
Ground clearance: 11.5 inches
Payload: 1,875 pounds
Cargo capacity: 15-76 cubic feet
Towing capacity: 8,200 pounds

REVIEW

Toyota Highlander goes Grand

By MARC D. GRASSO
Boston Herald (TNS)

One of the most familiar models in the Toyota fleet gets an upgrade in the form of the 2025 Grand Highlander. The 2025 Toyota Grand Highlander Nightshade Hybrid we tested is similar to the Lexus TX, which we recently also tested, but with basic Toyota finishes, perfectly suited for families looking for a mid-priced people mover with extra space and comfort.

Powering our Grand Highlander AWD was the familiar 2.5-liter four-cylinder hybrid engine producing 245 horsepower, rated to tow up to 3,500 pounds. The eCVT was noisy at times when pushed to the limits, but given that our tester achieved 34 mpg, we had no complaints. The Grand Highlander boasts great standard features such as seating for seven, 20-inch black wheels, second row captain chairs, a 12.3-inch Toyota Audio Multimedia infotainment system with a JBL 11-speaker system and heated and cooled seats. Upgraded on our Nightshade tester was premium paint, panoramic roof and a cargo mat.

Wind Chill Pearl, one of three exterior colors available on this model, showed out nicely, while black leather was standard on the inside. With 13 cup holders, wireless smartphone charging, seven USB-C ports and a 1500W inverter for two 120V AC outlets, the Grand Highlander is ready for travel, people moving, storage and comfort, ensuring everyone has adequate room.

The 2025 Toyota Grand Highlander AWD is a great-looking large SUV and a great addition to the fleet. Its large body style makes it useful for a variety of purposes, it gets better than anticipated mileage, and it won't break the bank. That's why I see Grand Highlanders on the road and in a ton of driveways already, as this all-purpose vehicle checks all the boxes for many consumers.

Marc Grasso / Boston Herald / TNS

A 2025 Toyota Grand Highlander.

2025 Toyota Grand Highlander Nightshade Hybrid AWD

MSRP: $52,610
MPG: 36 city / 32 highway / 34.0 as tested
As Tested: $57,552

New data reveal another hidden cost for EVs: High insurance premiums

By CAROLINE PETROW-COHEN
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

As the price of buying an electric vehicle is set to soar with tariffs and the end of government incentives, drivers who want to go green have another hidden cost to consider before making the switch.

The insurance premiums on electric vehicles are, on average, a whopping 49 percent higher than those for gas-powered cars, according to new data from the digital insurance platform Insurify.

It costs an average of $4,058 annually to insure an electric vehicle, compared with $2,732 for a traditional vehicle, according to the data. Electric cars cost more to replace, are more expensive to repair, and are more likely to have issues that lead to insurance claims, the report said.

The steep insurance prices for EVs come as the U.S. electric-vehicle industry is being battered by auto tariffs, federal legislation and the expiration of a tax incentive attached to new and used electric vehicles.

"Insurance costs, because they are ongoing, do matter in the long-term calculation of whether it costs more or less for any given person to drive an EV versus a gas-powered car," said Julia Taliesin, who authored the report.

Battery-powered cars cost more to insure because they have higher sticker prices, are more easily damaged and require specific parts for repairs, Taliesin said. A fender bender that would be a simple fix on a traditional vehicle could require an expensive and lengthy repair on an EV to mend the battery and recalibrate the car and its sensors.

"The cost of what's making up the car, and the cost of the labor to make those repairs, all go into why EVs are more expensive to insure," she said.

Insurance prices are even higher in states where there are fewer EVs and fewer mechanics who can work on them, the report said. In Arkansas and Idaho, where there is low EV adoption rates, the cost of full coverage for an electric vehicle can be almost twice that of a traditional car.

In California, it costs 15 percent to 31 percent more to insure an electric vehicle than it would to insure a traditional car, according to Insurify. Widespread EV adoption in the state drives prices down and gives insurers more data, allowing them to offer lower premiums, Taliesin said.

"California has been very intentional about infrastructure and incentivizing EV ownership," Taliesin said. "It leads the nation in EV adoption, and that has a bit of a waterfall effect on a few other things that relate to insurance costs."

As federal EV incentives dwindle under the Trump administration, state-level programs become increasingly important tools in encouraging EV adoption, experts said. The California Air Resources Board mandates that all new cars sold in the state by 2035 be zero-emission, an ambitious goal that faces challenges in Washington.

Transitioning more completely to electric vehicles is vital in the fight against human-caused climate change, experts say. However, recent polling data from Gallup show that fewer Americans are open to buying an EV than they were two years ago. As of April, 51 percent of those surveyed said they already owned or were considering buying an EV, down from 59 percent in 2023.

It's easier to insure an EV now than it was a decade ago, said Mallory Mooney, director of sales and service at Insurify.

"When we first started seeing EVs, we had a hard time placing Teslas for coverage and other specific models that we've seen are troublesome for repair," she said.

The Tesla Model X and Model 3 top Insurify's list of most expensive EVs to insure.

The Model X has an average annual cost of $4,765 for full coverage, a sharp 36 percent jump since last year. The data also show that the Model 3 has a claims frequency rate that is significantly higher than the industry average, indicating it may require more frequent repairs.

Most standard insurance carriers offer policies for EVs, but there are exceptions, even in California, Mooney said. Specialized carriers, including Aspire, Bristol West and National General, which offer policies to high-risk drivers, typically don't cover electric vehicles.

Though EVs tend to cost more to repair, they usually cost less to maintain under normal conditions, said Taliesin. Savings on maintenance and gas could help offset ongoing insurance fees and high up-front price tags on EVs.

"Electric vehicles are more technical and finicky," she said. "The more there are on the road, the more affordable they should become."

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

Rugged smartphone *loaded with features*

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

It's not a question of whether you will drop your smartphone, but rather when it will happen. The 8849 Tech Tank 3 Pro Ultimate 5G rugged smartphone is designed to withstand such drops, among many other features, making it one of the most durable and versatile smartphones on the market.

First and foremost, it is a cellphone that works with T-Mobile and Verizon networks. While that's great, as a company representative pointed out on my initial introduction to the Tank 3 Pro, it packs endless and incredible technology under the hood. 8849 is known for its rugged devices, and the Tank 3 Pro's features range from calls to incredible battery power and a built-in portable projector.

With its IP68 water-, dust- and shock-resistance rating, you won't need another case. This rating indicates it will withstand being in fresh water for up to 30 minutes at a depth of up to 60 inches. The protection provided is needed for what's inside, which includes a 100-lumen 120Hz DLP projector with adjustable focus and a powerful Dimensity 8200 processor.

The projector is ready to project photos and movies anytime, anywhere. It features auto keystone correction, ensuring the projected image is lined up correctly for viewing. With its highly efficient processor and high-capacity battery, the Tank 3 Pro can play for hours. The USB-C charging 23,800 mAh battery is rated for up to 118 hours of calls and 48 hours of video playback, and functions as a power bank to supply output power for charging other devices.

The Tank 3 Pro runs on Android 14, with Bluetooth 5.3, and has a 6.79-inch display with a resolution of 1080 x 2460 pixels and a 120Hz refresh rate. With all it does, overheating isn't a problem; a built-in cooling fan dissipates heat.

RAM is expandable up to 36 GB, with the standard being 16 or 18 GB. Both models feature 512 GB of memory, with 2 TB of expansion available.

The 8849 Tech Tank 3 Pro Ultimate 5G smartphone has a built-in portable projector and works with T-Mobile and Verizon networks.
8849 Tech / TNS

The rear AI camera features a wide-angle and telephoto lens, offering a resolution of up to 200 megapixels and 64 megapixel night vision. The front camera is 50 megapixels. It features facial recognition technology and sensors for various functions, including fingerprint recognition, a G-Sensor, a compass, and a gyroscope. The device features built-in speakers, a 3.5mm aux-out port, and an FM radio.

The Tank 3 Pro is a WiFi hotspot with a 4-in-1 navigation system combining local GPS, Glonass (a Russian satellite-based navigation system), BeiDou (a Chinese satellite navigation system) and Galileo (a global navigation satellite system developed by the European Union).

There's also a multi-use tool kit, a camping light with adjustable brightness and an emergency warning light.

https://8849tech.com/collections/projector-phones/products/tank-3-pro-newly-upgraded-5g-23800mah-200mp-projection-rugged-phone, $569.99 for the 16GB of RAM, 512 GB of storage, $639.99 for 18 GB of RAM, 512 GB of storage.

The Gooloo GT6000 is an all-in-one portable battery capable of charging everything from laptops to jump-starting a car.

Fortunately, I didn't have a dead car battery to test this on, but with its included jumper cables, it can start up 12-volt vehicles, boasting a 6000A peak current. It's listed to work with all gas and 12-liter diesel engine capacities. For other charging, simply use the built-in USB ports connected to the 27,000 mAh high-capacity battery.

The USB-C port supports charging the Gooloo GT6000 and delivers up to 100 watts of power. USB-A (1) supplies up to 18 watts, and USB-A (2) has a 5-volt, 1.4-amp output. The DC output is listed as 15V/10A, with a maximum output of 150W. There are 10 innovative safety features, including overcharge, high and low temperature overload, and reverse polarity protection.

To start a 12-volt vehicle with the included jumper cables, ensure the battery is charged, then connect the red cable to the positive terminal and the black cable to the negative terminal, and finally start the vehicle. A 3.2-inch LED display provides real-time updates on all essential features, including battery status and reverse clip warnings.

There's also a built-in 400-lumen LED flashlight with safety modes, including SOS, strobe and steady light. The portable battery will hold its charge for up to two years.

https://us.gooloo.com/collections/home-page-collection/products/gt6000-jump-starter, $139.99

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

Gooloo / TNS
The Gooloo GT6000 can charge everything from laptops to jump-starting a car. It has 10 safety features, including overcharge, high and low temperature overload, and reverse polarity protection.

Connecting hearing aids to your TV

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This week a reader writes, "I wonder if you could give me any suggestions on what would help me to hear the TV because my hearing is extremely impaired. I do have some expensive hearing aids that have lots of bells and whistles, BUT I can still never understand what is said without the (captions) and I love to watch rodeo and the (captioning) is HORRIBLE. We do have an older sound bar that doesn't work well at all."

Regular readers of this column might remember that my day job is in the IT department at an audiology clinic, so I was happy to hear this reader already has hearing aids.

My No. 1 piece of advice for anyone struggling with hearing is to get your hearing checked by an audiologist and to get and regularly wear hearing aids if needed.

These days, many hearing aids also have Bluetooth in them to allow them to connect wirelessly to devices like your cell phone. When connected, incoming phone calls will be routed to the hearing aid directly. This is akin to wearing AirPods, for those of you who might be too young to deal with hearing aids.

Most major hearing aid manufacturers also sell a device that's commonly called a TV streamer.

The designs will vary by manufacturer, but they are small boxes that have a Bluetooth transmitter in them that connects to a sound output on your TV.

With the TV streamer, the sound from your TV will be directly sent to your hearing aids, so you will get the best sound possible, depending on your hearing level, of course.

Before you buy the TV streamer, it is important to do a bit of research to make sure your TV has the right connection for it.

In the case of this reader, the TV streamer for her hearing aids connects to the TV via an output called TOS Link, or Optical Audio.

Not all TVs have TOS Link, but most do.

The TV streamer's web page should show a diagram of the connection, including labeling the needed outputs.

TOS Link is important because you can use it to provide sound for the TV streamer but the other TV speakers will also keep working so others in the room can hear the TV as well.

You can ask your audiologist for a TV streamer recommendation. Or if you know the model of your hearing aids, you can look on the manufacturer's website and see what's available.

There are some other solutions for connecting headphones to your TV. If you research them, make sure they allow simultaneous audio output to both headphones and speakers if others will be watching in the same room.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantech adviser@gmail.com.

Starkey / TNS
The sound from your TV will be directly sent to your hearing aids with TV Streamer from Starkey.

TECH REVIEW

New accessories for your desktop or travel bag from Seenda

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

One of the best parts of my gig as a tech reviewer is the chance to try out gadgets that might not be on my radar otherwise.

As an IT guy, I spend a lot of my workday on my computer, and I've worked my way through a lot of computer accessories such as keyboards and mice to settle on which ones I want to use daily.

Recently, I've been testing out a new mouse and keyboard from Seenda, which is not a company I'd heard of previously, so I was happy to try them out.

Seenda Dual-mode Ergonomic Mouse (MOU-302)

Like most people, I started out using whatever mouse came with my computer and didn't think much about it.

As computer mice evolved, features like wireless and scrolling and multiple buttons became more of the norm.

If you spend a lot of time at a desk (especially as you get older), ergonomics becomes a real concern. Things like your posture, and the comfort of your desk chair can make a big difference in your comfort.

I know a lot of people who have had serious issues with their wrists because they spend their days on the computer.

I think everyone's seen ergonomic keyboards, which aim to keep your wrists at an angle that reduces the stress of repetitive actions like typing.

What is relatively newer is ergonomics when it comes to your mouse. I've been using a Logi ergonomic mouse that costs around $100, and it is fabulous. However, for the last week, I've been using one from Seenda, and it does the job for a lot less money.

The Seenda Dual-mode Ergonomic Mouse ($29.99, seenda.com) has a lot of buttons and controls, but once I started using it, I came to appreciate its simplicity.

An ergonomic mouse is designed to keep your wrist in more of a natural position, more vertical, like a handshake.

I also need to mention this mouse is for right-handed use. It is not available for use in a left hand.

It has the same form-factor as my Logi mouse, but it costs so much less. The Logi has an app to customize the buttons and commands, but the Seenda mouse offers the same comfortable wrist angle without an app. The buttons on the Seenda aren't programmable, but they just work.

It has the usual left and right (noiseless) mouse buttons with a scroll wheel. It also has forward and back buttons under your thumb to help you with web browsing. It has three speeds that slow down or speed up how fast the pointer moves on your screen. Those speeds are set with a button below the scroll wheel.

It also has a dial on top to adjust your computer's volume. You can also press on the dial to play or pause music or videos.

The Seenda Dual-mode Ergonomic Mouse has a USB dongle you can plug into your Mac or Windows computer that pairs them immediately. You can also choose to connect the mouse to your computer or even your tablet via Bluetooth. There's a button on the bottom to switch between USB and up to two Bluetooth devices.

The mouse is powered by a rechargeable battery that uses an included USB-C cable to charge in about an hour. Seenda says a full charge will last around two months.

The Seenda Dual-mode Ergonomic Mouse did everything I needed and has exactly the buttons I wanted in the right spots. I didn't need an app to set things up, so I think it would be a great, and inexpensive option if you are looking for some wrist relief.

Seenda Foldable Bluetooth Keyboard (JP-302)

I've been toying with setting up an iPad mini as a writing tool and pairing it with a folding keyboard makes perfect sense, as I plan to carry them both in a cross-body bag.

The Seenda Foldable Bluetooth Keyboard ($37.99, Amazon.com) fits nicely in my small bag and it folds out to reveal a full keyboard and trackpad that can connect to two devices.

It has a rechargeable battery that offers three months on a charge via USB-C.

When it's folded, it measures 5.98 inches by 3.86 inches by 0.78 inches. Unfolded, it's 11.96 inches long. The keyboard's small size means the keys are a bit smaller than normal keyboards, and not all of them on the Seenda are the same size. Interestingly, the D, F, T and V keys, which are close to the place where the keyboard folds, are noticeably narrower, which takes a bit of getting used to, as does the split space bar.

The keys use scissor switches and are quite responsive and quiet.

As expected, I typed a bit slower on the folding keyboard because my fingers needed some practice to make sure they hit the right spots, but the size and portability are what I was after for my on-the-go writing kit that I wanted to keep as small as possible.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.

Seenda Dual-mode Ergonomic Mouse.
Photos by Seenda / TNS

Seenda Foldable Bluetooth Keyboard.

HOME&GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

Photos by Cathy Hobbs / TNS

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Don't skip edging and borders. It is often the "final touches" that make a landscape look complete and finished.

Landscaping do's and don'ts

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Landscaping is one of the most effective ways to elevate your home's curb appeal. Whether you're starting from scratch or refreshing existing elements, showing your landscape a little love can go a long way. Here are some top dos and don'ts for making your landscape shine.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com).

Do

1. Do create layers with graduated plantings. From low-growing shrubs to tall trees, layering plants at different heights adds dimension and drama.

2. Do consider wide plantings, as they will help visually extend the look of your landscape.

3. Do consider using native plants for your landscape.

4. Do give your hedges and trees a regular trim. Well-maintained greenery adds a sense of formality to your landscape.

5. Do spend the money on landscaping for a new home. Landscaping will mature and add not only value but will create an overall look and feel that will be aesthetically pleasing.

Don't

1. Don't overcrowd your planting beds. Plants need room to grow. Overstuffed beds can look messy and lead to root rot or disease.

2. Don't forget about year-round "succession of bloom." It is always a great idea to plant with the goal of always having an active landscape even in colder months.

3. Don't plant without a plan.

4. Don't skip edging and borders. It is often the "final touches" that make a landscape look complete and finished.

5. Don't ignore blending landscape with well-designed hardscape such as patios.

ASK ANGI

How should I prepare for fall?

By ANGIE HICKS
Ask Angi (TNS)

It may still be hot in much of the nation, but the crisp mornings and falling leaves mean autumn isn't far away, and winter is close behind.

This is your chance to button up the house, prep your equipment and make sure you're ready for the long, cold months ahead. Tackling these tasks now not only keeps you more comfortable through the season but also heads off costly repairs in the middle of winter.

Here are five fall projects worth moving to the top of your list before the first frost.

Steirus / Dreamstime / TNS

A professional chimney sweep can also check for blockages, cracks, or loose mortar that could allow dangerous gases into your home. Schedule service before heavy use in winter so your fireplace is safe, efficient, and ready for cozy evenings by the fire.

1. Test alarms and detectors

Before you worry about the cold, make sure your home's most critical safety devices are in top form. Test your smoke and carbon monoxide alarms, ideally once a month. If it's been longer than you can remember, make it the first thing you do this fall. Replace batteries annually, unless you have a 10-year sealed unit. In that case, replace the entire alarm at the end of its lifespan.

Follow National Fire Protection Association guidelines: install smoke alarms inside every bedroom, outside sleeping areas, on each floor of the home and near main living spaces. Carbon monoxide detectors should be placed on each floor as well.

Many homeowners handle testing and battery replacement themselves, but a local handyperson can quickly take care of installation, replacement and even rewiring if necessary.

2. Chimney and fireplace care

Fireplaces bring warmth and charm to chilly fall nights, but neglecting upkeep can turn them into a hazard.

Over time, soot and creosote build up in the chimney, creating a serious fire risk. If you plan on lighting your fireplace this season, get a chimney cleaning for about $250. A professional chimney sweep can also check for blockages, cracks or loose mortar that could allow dangerous gases into your home.

Schedule service before heavy use in winter so your fireplace is safe, efficient and ready for cozy evenings.

3. Gutters, roof and drainage

Falling leaves are beautiful, but they can clog your gutters quickly, leading to water damage, ice dams and foundation issues. Clean gutters now and check that downspouts direct water at least five feet from the house.

While you're up there, do a visual roof inspection. Look for missing, curling, or broken shingles, as well as sagging spots or signs of moss and algae growth.

If you're not comfortable on a ladder, hire a professional. Roof and gutter work can be dangerous without the right equipment, and a pro can also spot damage that's easy to overlook from the ground.

4. Prep your yard and deck for winter

Give your lawn a strong send-off before it goes dormant. Fall is prime time for overseeding to fill in bare patches, applying a slow-release fertilizer to nourish roots, and planting bulbs that will bloom in spring. Rake leaves regularly to prevent smothering grass, and compost them if possible.

Inspect your deck for loose boards, wobbly railings or signs of rot. Repair or replace damaged areas now so winter weather doesn't make things worse. A weekend of cleaning and applying a water-repelling sealant can protect the wood from snow, ice and moisture until spring.

Outdoor plumbing also needs attention. Disconnect hoses, drain them and store them indoors. Shut off outdoor spigots and drain excess water to prevent freezing. Add faucet covers for extra protection. If you have an irrigation system, hire a pro to blow out the lines and prevent frozen pipes from cracking.

5. Ready your tools and equipment

Autumn is your last chance to prep outdoor equipment for the offseason.

Clean lawn mowers, string trimmers and other gear to remove grass clippings and dirt that can cause rust. Sharpen blades, change oil, replace air filters and disconnect batteries for storage.

Check snowblowers now so you're not making emergency repairs during the first snowfall. Inspect bolts, belts, skid shoes and augers, and make sure you have enough fuel on hand.

Stock up on deicer for walkways and driveways, and replace worn shovels before they're hard to find.

If you use a generator, test it now and store extra fuel safely.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column. Visit at angi.com.

Should I hire a tree service?

By ANGIE HICKS
Ask Angi (TNS)

Cutting down a tree is one of those jobs that seems simple until you're standing at the base of a 40-foot oak with a rope, a chainsaw and no idea what to do next. Whether your tree is leaning a little too close to the roof, has suffered storm damage or just outlived its time in your yard, bringing in a professional tree service is almost always the smarter move.

From expert advice to safe execution, here's why hiring a tree service is worth the investment.

■ **Safety first:** Tree removal can be hazardous work. Even a seemingly small tree can cause major damage if it falls the wrong way. Professionals come equipped with ropes, rigging systems, harnesses and machinery that allow them to safely remove even massive trees in tight spaces. They're trained to assess the structure of the tree and the risks around it, including everything from power lines and property boundaries to hidden decay inside the trunk. Removing a tree might involve climbing with chainsaws, lowering limbs one at a time or using a crane to haul pieces over your roof. One wrong cut can lead to personal injury, roof damage or worse. Tree service crews take that burden off your shoulders, and they carry the insurance to back it up if something does go wrong.

■ **Experience matters:** When you hire a professional tree service, you're not just paying someone to cut a tree down. You're hiring a team of specialists who understand tree biology, local regulations and safety protocol. That's why many reputable services include certified arborists trained to diagnose tree health and recommend care or removal strategies. Sometimes what looks like a dying tree might be salvageable with the right pruning. Other times, a seemingly healthy tree might be rotten inside and ready to fall. An arborist knows the difference and can provide a long-term plan for your landscaping, not just a quick fix. Tree companies also bring the right equipment for the job and the know-how to work with it, so you're not renting gear you don't know how to use or trying to muscle tree limbs into a rented trailer.

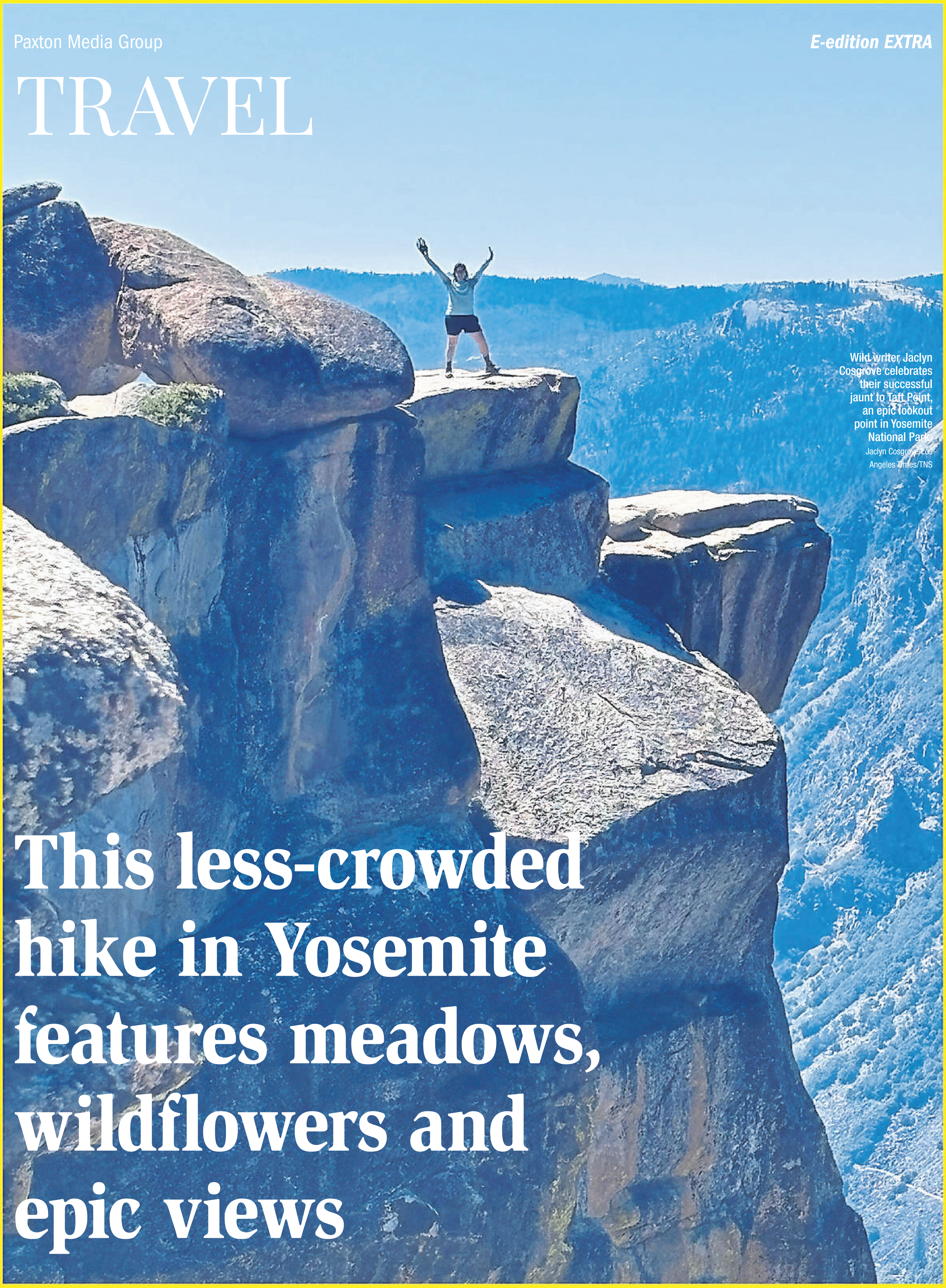
■ **Knowing the rules:** Every city and county has different regulations and license requirements about removing trees, especially if they're older, larger or within a certain distance of roads or property lines. Some towns require a permit for removal, while others protect certain species altogether. A tree service that works in your area knows the ins and outs of these rules and can secure the necessary permits before work begins. Trying to DIY without knowing the local codes can lead to rejected applications, or worse, citations or fines for unauthorized removal.

■ **Handling cleanup:** Cutting down a tree is only half the battle. The cleanup can be just as intense. Think sawdust, leaves, splintered limbs, trunk sections and a giant stump left behind. Most tree services include full debris cleanup in their quotes, which means they'll chip the branches, haul away the wood and even grind down the stump if requested.

One of the best reasons to bring in a pro? They might save you from making the wrong decision. Cutting down a tree is permanent. But an experienced arborist might recognize that strategic trimming or disease treatment could give the tree another decade of life without posing a risk. Arborists can explain the risks and offer solutions backed by experience, not guesswork.

Think of it this way: You're not just paying someone to cut down a tree. You're hiring a team that knows how to do it safely, legally and cleanly. And in the end, that's an investment worth making.

TRAVEL



Wild writer Jaclyn Cosgrove celebrates their successful jaunt to Taft Point, an epic lookout point in Yosemite National Park.
Jaclyn Cosgrove/Los Angeles Times/TNS

This less-crowded hike in Yosemite features meadows, wildflowers and epic views

By JACLYN COSGROVE
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Let's just get this out of the way: Hiking through Yosemite Valley, whether it be to Vernal and Nevada falls or through Cook's Meadow, is a mesmerizing and special experience.

The hulking granite walls will remind you how small you are – and how remarkable our world is. Listening as waterfalls thunder down the mountain can place you in a meditative trance if you let it. The beauty of the valley is the best kind of sensory overload. It's the reason that, at times, Yosemite can feel a bit crowded and why so many Angelenos are willing to drive 5½ hours north to reach it.

If you're wanting to experience Yosemite's beauty without the crowds, then dear Wilder, I have a little treat for you. Recently, I visited the park with my friend Patrick in search of a hike around Yosemite Valley where we could still find solitude. I'm so excited to share it with you!

Before we dive in, though, a few reminders:

■ Never trod off path into any of Yosemite's meadows, as they are sensitive habitats.

■ Check the weather before heading out; Yosemite's elevation varies widely, and it heats up in the summer, especially in the valley.

■ Pack accordingly – especially on day hikes – as rescue can take hours; your pack should include anything you'd need should you have to spend the night outside.

■ Do not feed the wildlife, including squirrels.

■ In short, please practice Leave No Trace as you explore this national treasure.

Patrick and I took a 10.4-mile journey to Taft Point, an epic lookout point that many hikers reach through a shorter 2.2-mile trek from the Sentinel Dome/Taft Point Trailhead. Let me tell you why, if your schedule and body allow, the long way is better.

We started our hike from our campsite in nearby Bridalveil Creek, one of about half a dozen campgrounds in Yosemite where you can book two weeks ahead, and walked .7 miles to the McGurk Meadow Trailhead, where around 11 a.m., there remained ample parking.

I was concerned about how hot it would get since we had gotten a later start, but we were immediately shaded on the trail by tall evergreens amid a forest floor of ferns and other greenery. After a short jaunt through the woods, we spotted the green and golden grasses of McGurk Meadow, still dappled with wildflowers.

As we traversed the narrow dirt path, we stopped to observe the red paintbrushes, purply pink fireweed and yellow goldenrod growing along the trail. No one rushed past us as we debated whether a particular white flower was yarrow or something else. (It was something else.)

About 1.8 miles from the trailhead, we reached the end of the McGurk Meadows Trail and continued northeast on the Pohono Trail. We'd seen around eight people at this point, including SoCal-based photographer Jason Anderson who told us about a bear he'd spotted ahead on the trail. (More on bears later!)

We arrived at Bridalveil Creek shortly thereafter, just over two miles in. We crossed a wooden bridge that takes hikers over the waterway, pausing to observe rainbow trout and chat with a hiker who'd spent the night in a nearby backcountry camp. This creek appeared to be the only water source this late in the summer, so if you have a filter and need to refill your bottles, this is where you should stop.

As we hiked through more pine forest, past yellow California coneflower and purple Sierra Larkspur, I asked Patrick: "Does this hike feel like a 'Yosemite hike'? Or was this like any other walk in the woods?"

Patrick paused to consider. We'd already passed a large pristine meadow. We'd seen several wildflowers still blooming and the crystal clear river still flowing despite the August heat. And we were almost always hiking under the shade of giant trees.

Still, when you are hiking in Yosemite, you're expecting to experience the cream of America's national park crop. Patrick confided in me that although he'd enjoyed everything so far, much of his expectations for our hike would depend on what we observed at Taft Point.

Unlike me, he hadn't Googled it before coming on the trip and didn't know what to expect. And although I'd seen the images, I feared this: What if it's all just clever Instagram angles, and this turns out to be a waste of precious time? (I am perpetually concerned about letting you down, dear Wilder!)

Then, just under four miles from the trailhead, the landscape shifted from pine forest to boulders and short trees and shrubs. We spotted a short metal railing and marched over boulders to the outlook. I gazed down at Yosemite Valley, my fears about the trail's splendor (or lack thereof) dissipating. El Capitan, which rises over 3,000 feet above the valley floor, was in full view. Yosemite Falls, mostly dry this time of year, was easy to spot.

I went to check out the famous rock outcropping I'd spotted online. Patrick, who was rapidly discovering his fear of heights, stayed at the railing to take my photo. I marveled all around me at all that rivers and glaciers had carved over millions of years.

Taft Point was the busiest point of our hike, but it was still easy enough to find a spot in the shade to enjoy our lunch. We saw fewer than 20 people on the trail and just a few dozen total at Taft Point. It never felt crowded.

As we headed back, I remarked to Patrick how surprised I was not to see a single bear given how few people were on the trail. I learned why when we met a group of about eight kids from South L.A. swimming in Bridalveil Creek.

"We saw four bears!" one of them shouted to us.

One of their chaperones showed us a picture of a bruin just off trail. I chuckled to myself. The children's joy over the sightings was infectious. And we still got to see squirrels, chipmunks, woodpeckers, blue jays and one deer just a few feet off trail (who wasn't particularly concerned about our presence).

A deer rests just off the McGurk Meadow Trail in Yosemite National Park.

I understand that writing about a less crowded hike in Yosemite will undoubtedly mean more people take this path. I heard similar complaints when I wrote about Kings Canyon last year. This is why I try to always include Leave No Trace principles and encourage hikers to respect the space.

Additionally, I hope my words not only inspire you to visit Yosemite but also to do further research, as this is only one of several less-crowded hikes in the park. Given the park's fever-pitch overcrowding, I was surprised to learn just how easy it remains to be alone in Yosemite!

I hope you find a similar solitude, should that be what your heart needs.